

THE SAFETY CATCH

By the same author—

THE SPLENDID ELI

THE SAFETY CATCH

A Novel
by
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FOR
MY MOTHER

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Part One

THE IDEA

CHAPTER ONE

I

THE idea came to him in bed. Unsought, unbidden, crashingly unexpected, it entered his head. As on the primal day when the first glorious rays lit the dark earth, so now—Someone or Something must have bidden the idea take brain, so to speak, and there it was, burning, swelling, asserting its glowing reality inside the tousled head of John Klooner.

The time by the alarm clock on the bamboo table beside John's bed was twenty minutes past four. The sun, however, was pouring golden light into the room as if it believed the time to be nearer eight than four—as indeed it was. If John had dialled TIM, a voice as golden as the sunshine would have told him that it was ten minutes to eight. But to dial TIM, John would have been obliged to rise from the bed where the idea had hit him, put on his dressing-gown and go down to the bottom of the stairs where the telephone clung to the wall. Besides, his landlady, Mrs. Grindrod, would have charged him twopence for use of telephone. All this trouble and expense was avoided by the simple act of adding three and a half hours on to the time as registered by the alarm clock. In order to wake—though not to rise—at the right time, John set the alarm at three-thirty, which meant that the bell made its revolting dawn cry at seven British summer time, or six by Nature. It would have been simpler, of course, to have set the hands of the clock at something a little nearer the correct time, but unfortunately the little knob that controlled the hands had rolled down through a crack in

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the floor, and it seemed like making a mountain out of a mole-hill to take up the floor boards to recover it.

Every morning when his landlord, Tom Grindrod, a London taximan, brought his cup of tea, reference was made to this matter. Mr. Grindrod had one of those faces—strangely numerous—which remind one inevitably of Punch. It was an agreeable, quite good-looking reminder that he carried about, but there was no mistaking the resemblance. Moreover, he had that wary outlook coupled with a readiness for argument that is labelled Cockney wit by those who are fonder of contemplating character than encountering it. He would come into John's bedroom, a cigarette in his mouth, a cup of tea in his hand, and look from his lodger to the clock.

"Yer want to mend that clock," he would say.

"Lost the jigger," John would say with closed eyes.

"A pair o' pliers 'ud do it."

"I haven't got a pair of pliers."

"I have. I'll do it for yer. Here, get hold of yer tea, unconscious."

John would sit up and drink his tea greedily, falling exhausted on to his pillow thereafter. Mr. Grindrod would watch this performance with a grin, and then leave the room with a sniff. But nothing was done about the clock, which continued to tick away the golden time in a vain chase after the sun, and a pale illustration of the weakness of human intention.

The time then was ten minutes to eight on a bright September morning of the year nineteen thirty-eight, the place forty-eight Rudyard Close, a quiet road in that newish suburb of London called by the too charming name of Blossomward. Over the doorway of Mr. Grindrod's house hung a plate bearing the name "Cartref." The first occupant had been a Welshman. Since his departure for his home town of Llanerchymedd, no fellow-countryman of his had been nearer Blossomward than the Wembley Stadium, so no one knew what Cartref meant. Mr. Grindrod had wanted to rechristen the house and call it "Home." John had suggested calling it "Domus," which prompted the daughter of the house to put forward the claims of "Chez-nous." But Mrs. Grindrod said these names were all so common, and that whatever

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"Cartref" meant it was a pretty word, and one she had never seen on anyone else's front door. So "Cartref" it remained.

John Klooner's bedroom window was immediately over the front door. From the window one could enjoy a view of the crazy paving leading to the gate, of the rather narrow curving roadway, and of the houses opposite, namely, "Indigowe," "Red Roof," "Delhi," "Elm View" and "Rob Roy." Since the day when he had described this view in a letter to his sister, John had only looked at it by accident; and who shall blame him for that? His bedroom was equipped for several pursuits. There was a desk to write on; chairs to sit on; books to read in a handsome case. But the fact is that he spent the heaviest part of his time in the room lying in bed. Like most other people, of course, he slept a good deal, and liked it. But he would say in a sententious tone—to those likely to believe almost anything—that his brain was most active when he was in bed—i.e., before and after the needful slumber.

The activity of his brain at these times was only matched by the extreme inactivity of his body. He would lie there, his long hair falling on his pillow, his eyes fixed unwinking on the ceiling, whose topography of web and crack he knew like a miser his pass-book, his hands palm down on the undersheet, his legs luxuriously stretched down so that his toes protruded from the bedclothes.

Here he was God. He said let things happen, and they happened. Many a distinguished and arrogant behind had he kicked there; many an important jaw had he punched as it so richly deserved. But lest it be thought that the bed of John Klooner was no more than a fantastic penitentiary, an ideal shambles, a court of feathery justice, it must at once be said that the nobility of John's thought was often as much to be admired as its variety was to be remarked. Sometimes he would think long on the necessity for goodness, and it would appear to him that there lived in his cranium a gentle person and a vengeful one; a bad young man and a good young man; a sensualist and an ascetic. He saw how in the mornings in bed they took turns at being him. When the good young John took charge of the morning reverie—which was usually after the bad young John had enjoyed a fair run for several mornings, all sorts

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of delicious cleansing resolves used to be taken, resolves so powerful and interesting, that John nearly rose from bed at once to put them to the test of action. Instead of such an extreme course, however, he very sensibly stayed where he was, and watched noble scenes in which the good young man put the tempter behind him, or treated suffering but repulsive humanity with a saintly calm and gentleness that made John feel a bigger cleaner man, and sometimes almost touched him to tears.

On the great morning of which we speak, however, John had awakened to a worry. It will be remembered that it was a September morning in that windiest of years, nineteen thirty-eight. It was becoming quite clear to all but the most wicked optimists that there was going to be a war. Literary imaginations had obligingly given people enchanting forecasts of what kind of a war it was likely to be. It was to be the kind of war an imaginative writer could let himself go about, without actually telling his clients how right it served them for being so stupid.

This was the worry. And there lay John, rolling it over and over with that mixture of pleasure and dislike that makes it for ever impossible to tell what human beings really do fancy. John summoned up the image of the Fuehrer, kicked its behind so viciously that he wondered if he would finish the day with a headache, tried the effect of goodness on him—in vain, like Mr. Lansbury—and relapsed into an unresigned gloom, like a newly captured leopard in a cage.

Then, suddenly, it happened. The idea arrived. Like a strange meteor, or a new approaching star, it appeared, small, golden and intact in the dull firmament of John's thought. For some impalpable measure of psychic time, John lay rigid, transfixed with wonder, gazing inwardly at the Idea. It grew bigger, more incandescent, more golden in the splendour of revelation. In an ecstasy of joy that he had it, yet of fear that fickle mind might lose it, John stretched out spiritual arms to it and held it to his brain. In flashing fleeting seconds of strange time, his mind, abnormally (it seemed to him) supple and active and strong, grasped the Idea and its teeming implications. Now he was wide awake. The good and bad Johns,

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the voluptuous and hermit Johns all were swept away, and there was only one John, excited, strong, resolute in his hold on the Idea.

The tumult of thought, the cataract of excogitation, the flare of ratiocination, the extreme joys of creation quietened down. John sat up in bed, swung his legs out and sat on the edge, awed, quiet, intense and newly-born.

He gazed at the floor, and he felt as if he were surrounded, not by the familiar things of the bedroom, but by the deep quiet flood-waters, crystal, shining, rippling from the burst of a mighty dam. The pent was unpent. The stopped was free. The bond was loose. The waters flowed that would free the World. For that was the Idea—no more, no less; an Idea that would save the World, liberate it from the fear and danger of war for ever.

A little shaky, but with a mighty confidence, John stood erect and walked over to the desk. At last he had something to write that must be written. He sat down and began to think of words to enshrine the Idea that had been born in flaming gold, that had now cooled and hardened into thought and resolve, and that must be expressed in the common language of the English people. (For a start.)

It seemed a little odd that the cataclysm of revelation should, when it came to writing down its essentials, appear at once so elusive and so banal. John began to write:

"The Idea came to me this morning that the cure for the World's fears and for War . . ."

He stopped and gazed blankly into space, summoning again the fireworks, the golden rain of the great moment, so that he could put its essence into noble prose. Just then, Mr. Grindrod entered with the cup of tea. Seeing John up, he stared, and then looked closely into the bed.

"What's the matter with the bed?" he asked. "You out of it is as good as a complaint."

John's annoyance at the difficulty of getting the Idea into words transferred itself to Mr. Grindrod.

"Don't," he said with a snort, "be a B.F."

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"Anyhow, I do have to try," said Mr. Grindrod, with some asperity. "There's yer tea."

He put it on the bamboo table, and came towards John, looking with inquisitive and screwed-up eyes at the paper. Bending slightly over, he began to read aloud in a slow and uninspired tone.

"The Idea . . . came to me . . ."

John clapped a hand over his paper, and glared at his host.

"Can't you mind your own business?" he demanded.

"Yes. And find a bit o' time over for other people's," said Mr. Grindrod cheerfully. "No offence meant, none taken, I trust."

"Yes, there is. Keep your eyes to yourself."

"Sorry. But I thought if it was an Idea for getting you out of bed, we might arrange to have supplies wholesale."

"Beat it," said John briefly, and poised his pen once more.

"Don't let yer tea get cold," warned Mr. Grindrod.

"No, no," replied John, beginning to write as Mr. Grindrod moved away.

"Tea does get cold, yer know, if yer let it stand," further remarked Mr. Grindrod, leaning against the door.

"Will—you—beggar—off?" shouted John, turning indignantly round and glaring at Mr. Grindrod.

"Sh! Yer'll wake the next-door baby, and he ain't heard words like that yet. His dad's still at sea."

The door slammed and Mr. Grindrod was gone. Something relaxed pleasantly in John's mind. He went on writing. A quarter of an hour passed, and the door opened again. It was Mr. Grindrod.

"Excuse me, yer 'Oliness," he said, "it's a quarter past eight, yer breakfast's on the table, and yer'll be late for work."

John looked round from his desk, his face full of a rapt look that Mr. Grindrod took for a threat of impending violence.

"Don't start on me," he said in alarm. "Them's the missus's messages, not mine. Yer ain't drunk yer tea. I don't care. Yer breakfast'll get cold. I don't care. Yer'll be late for work. I don't care. . . ."

John rose and faced Mr. Grindrod squarely. In his pyjamas and dressing-gown, he felt like a twentieth-century prophet. To his

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host he looked like a chap who was determined to be late for work.

"Mr. Grindrod," he said solemnly.

"Sir," replied Mr. Grindrod, conscious that some great pronouncement was going to be made.

"I have had a great Idea."

"That so? I 'ope there's money in it."

"No," said John. "But there's Hope and Peace in it."

"That a fact?" said Mr. Grindrod. "Well, we can do with more o' them. Wot's the Idea?"

"I must talk it over with you. It will be the salvation of the world."

"Go on."

This was rather an expression of amazement than an instruction to proceed. John accepted it in both senses.

"Yes," he remarked, not without a certain complacency. "In this little room may have been born a new era of peace and security."

Mr. Grindrod cast a glance around the apartment and its familiar furniture, as if assessing the extra value that might accrue to them as a result of what he was hearing.

"Strange," he remarked, "how things happen. Now I should have thought an idea like that would more likely have sprung up at Buckingham Palace, or the British Museum—yer know, where there was more room for it."

A quotation occurred to John. "The wind bloweth," he said, "where it listeth."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Grindrod. "Yer can't get away from that. Well, wot is this Idea, really?"

"It would take too long to tell you now," replied John. "But we'll have a talk over tea to-night."

"Yes," said Mr. Grindrod, glancing at the clock and doing a quick addition. "Yer'd better keep it till to-night, or yer'll be gettin' the sack for being late, and that 'ud tear it proper. An idea for saving the world. Mm." He looked suddenly anxious. "The world'll manage all right till to-night, I take it." John's eye fell on the clock also, and a vision of Mr. Gassdrop, the boss at his office,

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came into his mind. He grabbed his trousers. Reality forced the Idea aside for the moment. He, too, looked a little anxious. He abandoned the World to its courses till he should have time to attend to it after tea.

"It'll have to," he said shortly. "I'll be down in a couple of shakes."

"O.K.," said Mr. Grindrod. "If I see it doing anything very peculiar, I'll give you a ring."

To this pleasantry, John made no reply, but darted through the door into the bathroom.

II

John was late. Of the three degrees of lateness, he qualified with honours in the third. A man may be late in the Sneakers-In class, whereby he incurs no more rebuke than lifted eyebrows, or what is called a grave glance, usually bestowed over the top of a pair of spectacles, by the sort of senior who not only gloats over never having been unpunctual, but says that in fifty years' service he was never absent ill, which, after all, merely tells us that he has an inside like an ostrich, information from which a fastidious spirit recoils. Or he may be in the plain unadorned Late class, which merits—and gets—the stern oral reprimand, "You're late, you know." Behind these words lurks the suggestion that it is a bad thing to be late, and it is generally deemed unwise at that moment to begin a discussion on industrial theory, real wage, and whether punctuality and regularity have any absolute ethical value. But the Honour School of Lateness, the graduate who is so late that he only just escapes having failed to attend altogether—this is a case for an interview—whether precipitated by the criminal, or awaited with an unpleasing sense of certainty.

With an air of slow, strong confidence intended to deprive his office friends of their delicious pleasure, John walked to the door of the private room of Mr. Gassdrop, the terrifying General Manager of Village Estates Building Society, at the Piccadilly Office of which John had been accustomed to draw his salary for

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three years. In a second he decided on the compromise between a grovelling knock that should placate and a powerful one that might—possibly—intimidate. It did not appear to do either, for the noise that came through the door, though an invitation to enter, had the note in it that might have prompted the boldest to decline. It was, in fact, the kind of roar that keeps nervous people away from the Zoo.

John entered. He had, as we all do, spent a little time on thinking out the preliminaries of this painful interview. He need not have bothered. There weren't any. Mr. Gassdrop did not believe in them, and had never, in his reading, which was of a highly specialized nature, having to do with the speedy enrichment of Mr. Gassdrop, encountered the word *finesse*. The instant his cold blue eyes fell on John, it appeared that a spasm of the most severe internal pain seized him. His face contorted and his eyes glittered. He had a pen in his hand, and with his arm extended in a long rigid accusation, he pointed to the clock, which said that the time was seven minutes past ten.

"Look," said Mr. Gassdrop, "at that clock."

One would have thought from his tone that the clock had been guilty of the most indecent behaviour and that in a puritan fury, Mr. Gassdrop was calling on John to witness the full horror of its behaviour. John made no such mistake as to the Manager's meaning. Nor did he trouble to look at the clock now, for he had done that anxiously in the outer office, where the clock, though larger, told the same amount of truth. He merely gazed at Mr. Gassdrop without pleasure. Tall and erect though John was, the Manager was even taller. He had thin sandy hair, and carried himself like an ambitious recruit in the Guards. There were grave reasons for doubting whether he had any brains, and of all these his staff were cognisant, having given the matter some thought. He left no room for debate as to his manners. He had none, believing them to be part of the equipment of those who still had their way to make.

Since John said never a word, Mr. Gassdrop helped him out.

"You're late," he snarled, conferring an honours degree on his victim. "Damn late."

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The clock ticked on. John wondered why, since the objection to lateness was that it prevented one from getting on with the work, the Manager made him later still by staging a scene, but he did not like to make this point, in case Mr. Gassdrop felt it was purely a debating one.

"Furthermore," continued Mr. Gassdrop—"furthermore" was a word to which he was heavily attached—"furthermore, this is the third time you've been Thundering Late in the past fortnight."

It was evident that the Manager was not proof against that most vulgar temptation in recrimination, namely, Dragging up the Past. He flicked open his diary. A nasty thump seemed to take place somewhere in John's interior. The revelation that there somewhere exists a written record of one's capers is never an encouragement to true enjoyment of life. Mr. Gassdrop leaned back, and looked with angry sarcasm at the page before him.

"On the seventh," he said, as if the information was a gobbet of raw meat. "You were unfortunately delayed by a hold-up on the Tube, news of which did not reach Fleet Street, for there was no reference to the matter in the evening press." He gave the diary another flick with his pen. It obligingly showed John up again. "On the thirteenth—or I should say, during the night of the twelfth to the thirteenth, you were equally unfortunately the victim of a severe attack of biliousness. Now what may I have the pleasure of recording in my diary—for you see how methodical I am in these matters—on this occasion?"

Mr. Gassdrop smiled at John, and hatred filled the room.

"I am late," replied John, "because I stayed in bed too long."

"Yes," said Mr. Gassdrop. "And what else have you to say about it?"

"I'm sorry, sir," replied John. Mr. Gassdrop was one of those who made the act of apology somewhat difficult and complicated, and John now had to translate a surging desire to punch Mr. Gassdrop in the nose into the quiet words just recorded.

"You're sorry," said Mr. Gassdrop. "Is that all?"

An ugly look came on John's face, and the muscles of his mouth got a little out of hand.

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"What else," he said, "can I do or be?"

"I'll answer that," said Mr. Gassdrop with ferocious enjoyment. "I'll answer that. You can mend your slack slipshod ways, and get here at nine fifteen as you're paid to do. Less glib apology and more punctuality." Mr. Gassdrop paused and turned a bitter smile on his victim. "I believe you think," he continued, "that with your great charm, you can get away with anything." The smile vanished, and the look of fury came back. "Well, we don't pay for charm. We pay for work. I realize that a cold shudder goes down your spine at the mere mention of work. But that's why we employ you—to enjoy—if you will allow me to say so—the benefit of your labour."

No words can describe the tone in which these remarks were made, and none can do justice to John's feelings as he listened to them.

"Perhaps you will permit me to say a word on my own behalf," said John, his teeth chattering, though not with cold.

"If you can think of anything to say, by all means say it," said Mr. Gassdrop, "though it won't put the sun back an hour."

"You say I am paid for work," said John.

"I ventured to attribute that motive to the company," said Mr. Gassdrop. "Can you think of a better?"

"No," replied John, "not even putting up with abuse."

It is a pity that Nature refrains from comment on human situations. Something ought to have happened at this moment. All the pictures ought to have fallen down, a horrified comet should have torn across the sky, a clap of thunder should have shaken the office. But no. Riposte was left to Mr. Gassdrop; and even he felt for a moment the limitations of being a human being and not an earthquake. For an instant it looked as if he were going to hurl himself across the desk and bury his teeth in John's throat.

"You insolent hound," he cried. "So I am not permitted to protest in the company's name if the great man is late!"

If Mr. Gassdrop had been a kettle, the office tea would have been ready in a twinkling. Boiling is infectious. John could have been the hot-water jug to Mr. Gassdrop's kettle. He felt a refreshing disgust, a justifying rage.

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"Certainly," he said. "I'm not denying your right to complain in the company's name or out of it, of my lateness, for which I've said I'm sorry. But I'm not obliged to listen to your abuse, and I'm not going to."

"Oh," said Mr. Gassdrop. "Oh."

Each of the protagonists was regaling his private mind with a vision situated in the near—the richly near future. Though Mr. Gassdrop may have appeared at a loss, he was not. He was only wondering how he could make an execution last a longer time than it is in the nature of executions to do. And John was thinking of the conference with his office friends which would take place in the gents' lavatory the moment he escaped from Mr. Gassdrop's presence. All too often, it is necessary, in recounting the details of a row, to touch up the picture—to flush the victor and to bleach the corpse of the vanquished. In this case, John was going to make the truth mightier than the rosiest fiction.

"Pray continue," said Mr. Gassdrop with ominous quiet of manner.

John stared at him, sucking in the nourishment of hatred and disdain.

"I see you have more to say. Go on. Let us hear it," urged Mr. Gassdrop. "All of it."

The last three words came out like nails and jagged pieces of metal out of a murderous shot-gun. They slew John's shreds of tact with a mighty slaughter.

"Right," he said. "Right. You're asking for it. You shall have it. You're the last man to have authority over others. You're cruel and petty. You've managed to upset every single one of the staff, so that they all hate and despise you, and although you're nominally in charge, you get no more loyalty and willing service than if you were the office boy. If," went on John in a tone of growing heartiness and enjoyment, "I were in your position and had so thoroughly alienated everyone, I should count myself a miserable failure and I should resign. That's what I feel—what we all feel—and I think you ought to know it."

"Yes," said Mr. Gassdrop, who had looked at John as a mouse-

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trap may be supposed to look at a mouse during this remarkable oration, "I want to know what you feel, if only to make the job of sacking you doubly necessary and doubly pleasant. When you can work half as well as you can talk, you may have the chance to find out how well you can do a job like mine. But it won't be with this firm. I'm presenting you with a new start. You're fired. Now . . . get out."

Sacked. That would a little spoil the tale to be told in the gents' lavatory, for it was hard to think of a witty retort to Mr. Gassdrop's last remark. John had but one shot left in his locker. It was inevitable that he should come out with it. It was the moment for the Dirty Secret to be revealed.

"Very well," said John, "but before I leave, I'd like to run over the petty cash-book with you."

Mr. Gassdrop's face went a deep and agreeable red. The ball—so to speak—went into the distant pocket with a slap.

"Why?" he demanded in a dangerous voice.

"There are some discrepancies that have been worrying me for some time," replied John, in the polite tone of a blind man at a burglary, "and I don't want any misunderstandings when I've gone."

Mr. Gassdrop's colour returned to normal, and then fell below it.

"Why did you not report it to me when you first discovered these—discrepancies?" he asked.

John enjoyed that question, and even more his own reply.

"Because only you and I have access to the book, and only you unchecked access to the cash."

There was a dreadful silence. Then Mr. Gassdrop, with clenched fists and teeth, walked up to John. He came close and stared into his eyes. His mouth worked, but no word came therefrom. But at last he managed from the tumult to extract and then eject one little word. Raising his arm again, he pointed, not to the clock, but to the door.

"Out!" he said; and who shall measure the cordiality of his wish that the room had been the universe.

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With as much dignity as could be mustered by a man who did not know whether he would be felled by a blow from a fist on his head, or paralysed by a kick on his behind, John walked out.

III

As he entered the large general office, closing the manager's door behind him, three young men looked up from their desks and stared enquiringly at him. The largest of these, a young man called Trumper, with a humorous long face and an addiction to curly pipes, rose and pointed significantly to a door in the corner of the office; and receiving a triumphant nod from John, said in a rumbling voice, "Look to my telephone for a moment, Joe," and walked off in the direction he had indicated.

John hung up his hat, put his gloves in his drawer, and following, found Mr. Trumper leaning with folded arms against a wash-basin in the gents' lavatory. John put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall.

"Well?" asked Mr. Trumper.

"I've done it this time," in the tone of a man who has just put a hand-grenade in another man's pocket.

"Done what?" asked Mr. Trumper, resolved to savour sensation in the words of John's mouth.

"I'm sacked."

"Go on," said Mr. Trumper, drawing these words out to a great length. His blue eyes, always rather prominent, now protruded, and his mouth hung for a moment agape. "He's got the guts to do it, then."

The door opened, and in came Mr. Ferdinand Slogrund, a youth with hair well-greased and brushed back, a pale and rather pimply face, and spectacles that gave him an expression of slight astonishment.

"I heard him say 'Out,' " he said, closing the door and leaning against it. "Out of the room or the job?"

"Both. I'm sacked, lads . . . but I told him the Dirty Secret."

"You didn't!" exclaimed Mr. Trumper and Mr. Slogrund as one.

John turned round and contemplated the face of a dismissed

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servant of the company, in the mirror behind him. He gazed with complacency on its solemn beauty.

"What good did that do?" demanded Mr. Slogrund.

"It made him ruddy unhappy."

"Come away from that mirror and tell us what you said," cried Mr. Trumper impatiently, "the exact words."

John turned towards them as someone outside the door pushed violently to remove Mr. Slogrund, who staggered and opened the door to admit Joseph Gearie, whose curiosity had overcome his sense of duty in respect of four telephones. He was a fat, round young man, with a large close-cropped head, blue eyes behind round spectacles, and a very red face. His manner was one of crisp decisiveness, and he was given to striking Napoleonic attitudes, folding the arms, compressing the lips, lowering the head to gaze at other people in what he hoped was a frightening manner.

"What's going on in here?" he demanded, glancing sternly from one to another of his colleagues. All four telephones seemed to ring at once.

"Listen to the telephones," said Mr. Trumper. "I told you to attend to them, Joe."

"While you get the news in the studio. Not, as Miss Doolittle remarks, bloody likely," said Joe. "Let 'em ring. Now, John. Where are we? What's the position?"

He said this like a general who, properly informed, would make the necessary dispositions to recover lost ground.

"I'm out," said John.

Joe looked at him with head lowered. "Sacked?"

"That's it."

Joe fell into a swift reverie. His summary complete, he spoke.

"Oh," he said. "That's bad."

"Moreover," added Mr. Trumper, "he told Gassdrop that he's a dirty thief."

"Is that why he sacked you?" demanded Joe.

"No. He sacked me, and I came out with it."

"What did you actually say?" asked Mr. Trumper. "And what did he say?"

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"I said that as I'd discovered certain discrepancies, I'd like them cleared up before I went, so that no suspicion fell on me."

"And he said?" asked Joe.

"Out!" replied John, at which example of Mr. Gassdrop's wit the whole company, including John, laughed till the tears came into their eyes. They repeated the gem with varying intonations and to the accompaniment of gestures suggested by the exuberance of their fancy, that they might enjoy laughter to the point of pain and distress.

While this was going on, Mr. Gassdrop pressed his bell-push. The bell rang, after its almost invariable custom, in the outer office. Only Miss Bessie Diett from the typing-room heard it as she sat there doing her best with the four neglected and umbraged telephones. Frightened though she was of the manager, she regained control of her stomach and lungs and went into his office.

"Send Mr. Klooner to me."

"He's not in the room at the moment, Mr. Gassdrop."

"Well, then, go and tell him I want him," said Mr. Gassdrop testily. Miss Diett looked horrified.

"Oh, I couldn't do that."

"Why not?" demanded the manager obtusely.

"Well—he—you see—it's rather difficult——"

Mr. Gassdrop saw and snorted. "Then send one of the other men."

Miss Diett's confusion deepened. "Oh, Mr. Gassdrop, they're none of them in the office—they're in——"

Mr. Gassdrop stared. "What—all?" he cried, unconsciously echoing Macduff. "Did you say all?"

"Yes, Mr. Gassdrop," said Miss Diett, her eyes watering under the strain of the interview. Mr. Gassdrop rose.

"Very well. I'll find him."

He walked through the general office and pushed open the door of the gents' lavatory. In spite of the knowledge that Mr. Gassdrop was a felon, a thrill of horror and apprehension seized the young men. Even John, in the happy position of a man to whom nothing more can be done, suffered his habitual spasm of fear at being caught

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in idleness by the manager. As for Mr. Slogrund, he trembled at the knees, and only just prevented himself from popping into one of the cubicles provided for purposes other than mere concealment.

"Oh, there you are then, Klooner," said Mr. Gassdrop affably. "If you can spare a moment, perhaps you'll step into my office."

John followed Mr. Gassdrop without a word, and the three young men looked at one another.

"Well, I'm damned," said Mr. Trumper.

"Such," remarked Mr. Gearie, putting a hand in his coat, "is the power given to one man over another by knowledge of a dirty secret."

In the manager's office, John was being treated nicely. Mr. Gassdrop waved a hand toward the easy chair reserved for important clients. "Sit down, Klooner," he said. He put a hand in the cigarette box, took a cigarette and lit it. Then he remembered John and gave him a cigarette, lighting it for him with an almost affectionate match.

"D'ye smoke much?" he asked, smiling pleasantly.

John said hardly at all.

"Wise man. It's an expensive habit."

Not, thought John, the most expensive habit you have.

Mr. Gassdrop stalked to and fro for a few moments, drawing at his cigarette. Then, still pacing, he spoke without looking at John.

"I was a trifle hasty this morning, my boy. I've been thinking things over, and I want to make amends for an over-hasty judgment. You're a good worker, and I don't want to lose you. You can consider the notice I gave you as withdrawn."

"Thank you," said John, rising to his feet. Mr. Gassdrop raised a hand.

"Wait," he said. "Sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Now there is another little matter. You made a remark this morning that I could only regard as an accusation of theft against me."

Mr. Gassdrop stopped pacing and looked at John with an open smile.

"Surely you can see—and I am ready to regard your remark as hasty and ill-considered—how ridiculous such a charge is?"

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"Well——" began John.

"I am a man enjoying a good salary," went on Mr. Gassdrop. It was actually four hundred and fifty. "Is it likely that I should stoop to petty pilfering and jeopardize my standing—indeed, my very position with the company?"

A stubborn look came on John's face. "Well, Mr. Gassdrop," he said, "it's most unlikely, of course. But there are the discrepancies, amounting to nearly a hundred pounds."

Mr. Gassdrop sat on his desk and swung a nonchalant—a too-nonchalant leg. "Look here, Klooner. We're both men of the world." He took another cigarette and pushed the box towards John. "Do have another cigarette. No? Well, as I was saying, we're both men of the world, and I don't mind admitting to you that I've had a certain amount of domestic trouble recently."

John wondered what interesting variety of domestic trouble a bachelor of forty might meet. The Manager looked sadly at his right foot. "Consequently—and this is for your car and yours alone—I've had to borrow a little money in the way you've very cleverly discovered. You know what money lenders are. I couldn't go to them. But of course, in my position, such an action as this petty-cash thing is a mere loan, which I shall pay back—next month—next week, maybe. I assure you the Directors would look on the matter in this light, and that is how I want you to look at it, now you've discovered it. Naturally, I didn't want to tell you about it. I felt ashamed of needing money. You see?"

"I see," said John.

"So I think we can keep this little affair secret between us."

Mr. Gassdrop rose. "And I'm so glad you'll stay on. I should really hate to lose you. As a matter of fact, I've been on the verge of putting your name forward for a rise. I'll see that you get it. It's high time you had a sweetener."

Mr. Gassdrop appeared to regard the matter as settled, so John left him without waiting this time for the order to move.

CHAPTER TWO

I

AT one o'clock, John, Mr. Trumper and Joe Gearie went to lunch, leaving Mr. Slogrund in charge of the office. It was their custom to eat what is so justly called a square meal—the kind whose edges stick into the stomach all the afternoon—at a restaurant called by its proprietress “The Barrow Cuisine,” and by its clients “Old Mother Clapp’s.” It was one of those eating-houses which are unendurably hot in summer and dismally cold in winter, which smell of food, especially cabbage, all the year round, and whose resources are just equal to slapping the square meal on a round table and leaving it at that. The windows were steamy, and outside the door hung a little board which told the clients what was going to be done to them. On the great day in question, the board warned all and sundry, in capitals of red chalk, that the square meal consisted of Roast Beef, 2 Veg., Stewed Fruit and Cus., Cup of tea or coffee, which self-inflicted violence could be done by all who had a shilling and were agreeable to its malconversion in this way. “The Barrow Cuisine” stood in Barrow Way, a vague little turning with no pride, off Grosvenor Street. There was no reason of equal validity for the addition of the word Cuisine.

When the young men had polished off the solid part of the shilling repast, to which their silent reflections about Mr. Gassdrop were a delicious sauce—they drank their tea and smoked with as much leisure and dignity as if Mother Clapp were Mr. Fortnum and Mr. Mason rolled together into one stout and toothless female.

Being relieved of anxiety concerning the events of the office morning, John’s mind was now free to brood upon the Idea. When, therefore, Mr. Trumper raised what was uppermost in his mind, John dismissed it impatiently.

“What about Gassdrop now?” asked Mr. Trumper, as one opening up a far and sunlit countryside for the general enjoyment.

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"Never mind him," said John shortly. "I've got more important things than him to think about."

"You may have," retorted Mr. Trumper, "but have we?"

"Gassdrop's dealt with. We shan't get any more trouble from him. Anyway, who is he? He just doesn't matter," said John.

"Oh, no," replied Mr. Trumper. "No, no. Of course he doesn't. No, no."

John pursed his lips and looked hard at his friend. "If you fancy that you've a gift for sarcasm, you'd better practise it when there's more time to get yourself proficient," he said. "Meanwhile, I want to talk about something else—something really important. I've had an Idea—a great Idea."

"What is it?" rapped out Joe, folding his arms and fixing John with his blue eyes.

"What should you think," said John, "if I told you I knew how to stop this war that'll come, otherwise, as sure as there's a nose on your face?"

Mr. Trumper scratched his nose and squinted at John. Joe spoke immediately.

"I can tell you that on the spot. I should think you'd gone barmy. Anyone who said he could stop the war ought to be certified. It's got to come."

"If you and a few million others," said John, looking very sternly at Joe, "would stop saying things like that, we might have a chance. And that's my Idea."

Now John saw himself as slightly larger than the bellicose world, nourished and inflated by the power of the Idea. Joe and Mr. Trumper, on the other hand, saw John as they had seen him daily for some years. They were handicapped by the difficulty of believing that it was going to be left to a clerk in a building society office to save the world from war. Joe spat incredulity. Mr. Trumper wanted to giggle.

"Now wait a minute," said Joe, resting his elbows on the table. "Let's get this right. The Germans are evidently out to make trouble. You do agree, don't you?"

"Yes."

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"Yes. And you don't think we and the French and the Russians and the Americans are going to hand over the swag without a squeal, do you?"

"No."

"So with about four or five hundred million people all set for war, you think you—*you*—have got an Idea that will stop 'em. Is that it?"

"I have. And if you'll stop proving that I haven't—just for a minute—I'll tell you what it is."

"Thank you," replied Joe. "It'll be worth hearing. Only I wonder we haven't heard it before from some other statesman."

The great moment was at hand. The Idea was to be put into words before its first tiny audience. It seemed to John to be one of the great moments of history and to bear a close resemblance to them. Certainly he began by favouring Joe with a nasty look. Then he began, speaking slowly, weighing every word in the scales of his vision of the early morning.

"Supposing—just supposing, for a moment that everyone—everyone in the world—no——" John stopped and rapped his brow with his knuckles. "No, that won't do."

Joe smiled cynically and Mr. Trumper nodded continuously, his eyes drooping sleepily, for the square meal was beginning its work, his pipe bowl held in his two hands.

"Ah," said John. "I have it."

"I thought you'd got it already," said Joe.

"The words, ass. I've had the idea since eight this morning."

"Real time or summer-time?" asked Joe.

John looked murderously at him, and then continued speaking. If the printer had time, he ought to print the following words of John in red ink, as he did the much less important revelations of John Ruskin concerning poverty.

"I saw as in a dream——"

"It probably was," murmured Joe. John ignored this. "I saw as in a dream, what the effect would be if all the peoples of the world resolved never to mention, in speech or writing, or to read or listen to references to, the words associated with war."

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Mr. Trumper and Joe behaved like the man who, not having seen the point of the joke, awaits it in hopeful silence.

"Do you see the effect?" demanded John.

"Oh, yes," replied Mr. Trumper. "It'd kill masses of conversation."

"And ruin Fleet Street," added Joe.

"Tripe," said John rudely. "You've no vision, either of you. The effect would be the immediate disappearance of war and the threat of it from the face of the earth."

"That's what you saw as in a dream?" asked Joe.

"That's what I'm telling you," replied John.

"Well?" said Joe, expectantly.

"Well—what?" said John.

"The Idea—tell us what your Idea is," said Joe.

John looked up at the ceiling in a wild despair.

"That is the idea, you——" John broke off the sentence.

One could not talk to audiences, even small ones composed of mental defectives, like that.

"I don't follow you," said Joe. "I haven't noticed any idea yet."

John clenched a fist and banged the table.

"I'm trying to point out that if no one spoke or heard of war or anything to do with it, the thing itself would automatically disappear."

Joe nodded his head. "I see. So we add words like gun and tank and rifle to the list of unmentionables—not for polite use. Eh?"

"Exactly," replied John. "It's soaking through. They're barbarous words and they stand for barbarous things. You see the force of this, don't you, Trumper?"

"Partly," said Mr. Trumper, who from good-nature and starch-heaviness, was more amenable than Joe, who had a powerful digestion.

"That," said Joe, "is not an idea. It's a joke."

Pioneers have to start on themselves, so John was obliged to push out of his mind an attractive image of a short length of lead-piping. He gave a sigh of deep disgust, leaned back in his chair, sought relief by moving a cup and saucer. Then new energy came to him.

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"When you've given your head time to work," he said, "you'll see that what I've told you has world-wide possibilities. And what strikes me about it all is that it's so simple."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Trumper. "That struck me too."

"And me," said Joc. "And me."

In spite of his vigorous assertion of the power of the Idea, John was beginning to have those difficulties common to and well-known by all thinkers. Where now was the urgency and brilliance of the morning mood? Where now the perfection and stark conviction of the thought? Like a receding wave, his memory of the great moment of inspiration was ebbing hopelessly away, leaving only the sand and gravel of everyday consciousness. His conviction of his own ordinariness stuck out of the ebbing tide like a boulder, the thought of his position in the world, in the office loomed craggily in his mind. Inspiration is not daily bread. He looked round his empty discouraged mind in a panic realization that his first assault on his fellow-men was failing. And how he hated them for it. And then he saw light and hope. It was not the doubts of his companions that had sapped his mind. It was his own want of Faith in the vision. Back into consciousness flowed the vision of the doomed millions of mankind. The crowded places of the earth, the streets of Chinese towns, the myriads of the Indian continent, the hosts of the Americas, the multitudes of London, all lifting up their hands to the pitiless clouds of impending war. With a little spurt of rage, he blamed Joe for it all. He felt like a father tackling the terror of his children. He leaned forward and pierced Joe with a glare.

Joe survived.

"Don't you care whether there's a war or not?" he demanded.

"Not a lot," replied Joe calmly.

"Nor you, Trumper?"

Mr. Trumper took his pipe lazily out of his mouth, and pressed the tobacco with a large thumb.

"Well, I was going walking in Austria next year," he said. "Bit of a nuisance if that's off."

John let out a howl like a bloodhound. Old Mother Clapp was at a neighbouring table and turned at the sound.

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"What's the matter, dear?" she asked with concern.

"Indigestion," said Joe, pointing to his own stomach.

"Oh, no, it's not," said old Mother Clapp indignantly. "Not off vittles sold here. I have the best of everything——"

"No, no," said John. "It's only a little thing. Not a huge problem like a shilling lunch. I'm saying that war can be prevented, and these chaps say they don't care much if it is or it isn't prevented."

Mrs. Clapp, a very stout matron clad in rusty black, with a whitish apron, sat on the chair next to John.

"Pity Mr. Clapp's gone," she said. "He was hot on this. He was a great thinker, was Mr. Clapp."

"Well," said John, "what did Mr. Clapp think?"

"I'll tell you," replied Mrs. Clapp. "He said it was Gawd's will there should be a war every now and again to punish us for our sins and thin us off a bit."

John surveyed Mrs. Clapp. He could not help feeling that it was some time since a nice bit of sin had been in her way, though she was still eligible for a process of thinning-off.

"So long," he said, "as it's not oneself that is punished or thinned off. Would you like to be thinned-off by a bomb or a bullet, Mrs. Clapp?"

"That ain't the point," said Mrs. Clapp. "Yer can't pick and choose in a thing like that. There's always been wars and there always will."

"No!" said John. "There will not. They can be prevented."

"Who's to prevent 'em?" asked Mrs. Clapp, flicking crumbs off the table. Mr. Trumper and Joe looked at John. "I am," he said.

Mrs. Clapp had seen a great deal of life. What with midwifery, lay-outery and cuisinerie, she was a woman difficult to surprise. She looked at John as if he had said he could find the ace of spades nine times out of ten. She smiled and shook her head.

"Yer'll never do it, my boy," she said. "It's the good Gawd's will. He puts it into people's heads to have a war all in His good time. Yer don't think He'd put it into Hitler's head to have a war, with one hand, and into yours how to stop it with the other, do

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yer? I wish Mr. Clapp was still here. He'd have put it to yer ever so much better than I can." She turned towards John and looked at him indulgently. "How did yer think yer were going to stop a war, dear?"

John told her, forcefully. Even as he spoke, she smiled and shook her head slowly. The intimate technique of modern politics for dealing with opponents again occurred to John's mind with pleasing force. That made two murders, certain, during the lunch hour. Mr. Trumper had not yet sealed his doom.

"No," said Mrs. Clapp. "It don't make sense. It's like wishing away my sciatic. I do wish it away, but it stays. Think about getting on in the world, and girls and such things as is more natural in young fellers. That stuff won't get you anywheres. If there's a war, Gawd's will be done, I say, and let them as don't get killed not quarrel with their luck."

"It's no good," said John, rising, "talking to you."

"Not a bit," said Mrs. Clapp, rising too, though not with the same ease. "I'm too old for that—and most other things too. That'll be three shillings to-day. Yer didn't have a second cup o' tea, did yer? No. Three shillings, then."

The young men paid and went. They walked down Bond Street in silence.

"John," suddenly said Mr. Trumper.

"Well?" said the disgruntled prophet.

"I can see something in this idea of yours. I can see that the things we stop thinking and talking about do vanish. Or is it that they vanish and we stop thinking about them?"

"It works both ways," said John swiftly. "If you're in love with a girl and you stop thinking about her, your love vanishes, doesn't it? And if your love vanishes, you stop thinking about her."

This sort of talk was too deep and subtle for the Napoleonic Joe, who did not believe in love, anyway. He strode along with pursed lips and a heavy frown.

"But," went on Mr. Trumper, "if your idea is a winner, telling Joe and me and old Mother Clapp won't save the world. You'll have to tell everyone."

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"Obviously," said John. He had evidently thought of this necessary little chore.

"How are you going to do it?" asked Mr. Trumper.

"I don't know—yet," replied John. "Dammit, I only thought of the idea this morning. I can't plan a world campaign in a day."

At this planetary remark, Joe Gearie shook his head, but did not trust himself to speech.

II

It was six o'clock in the evening of the same day. John sat at a late tea with Mr. Grindrod, whose taxi stood outside "Cartref" while its owner-driver stoked up for the evening's labours.

"Well," said Mr. Grindrod, cutting the top off his second boiled egg. "Yer see the world's still here, all ready to be saved. Have yer still got the great Idea?"

John looked at Mr. Grindrod, a spoonful of egg halted on its way to his mouth. He felt that if he was going to have the same trouble with his landlord as with his colleagues, he would have to break something noisy and brittle. But Mr. Grindrod sat there, sideways on his chair, with his legs crossed, his peaked cap and leather coat on. He wore these from dressing in the morning till he went to bed at night, and gave the impression of never being settled down for an hour, but always being on the verge of going, as if, in response to a shout of "Taxi!" he might fade before one's very eyes, like the Cheshire cat, leaving only a memory of his kindly grin.

"Yes," said John. "I've still got the idea," and he popped the spoonful of egg in his mouth. Mr. Grindrod, to whom an egg was a contemptible matter of two mouthfuls, licked his spoon finally, poured out a cup of tea, produced a Woodbine from his cap, lit it, and inhaled deeply.

"Well," he said, smoke shaking out on the shape of his words, "tell us about it, then."

"Do you," demanded John, "want to learn something, or do you intend to start a debate, showing what a witty, smart, clever chap you are, at the same time demonstrating that I ought to be

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in a loony-bin? Are you prepared to empty your mind of prejudice just long enough to hear all I've got to say before you start talking? Can you conceive it possible that I've got something, even if it does sound new and unusual?"

"That's what they call the preface in books, ain't it?" said Mr. Grindrod, shaking ash into his egg-shell. "An' I judge you've been talking to someone else, and it didn't go too well."

"Quite right," said John grimly. "Now how did you guess?"

Mr. Grindrod winked and nodded his head complacently.

"Psychology," he said. "You need it in our job. If yer watch dogs long enough, you can tell whether they're going to bite and who it's going to be. But I'll listen, guv'nor. Get cracking."

John cracked. Mr. Grindrod did not interrupt. He played with a match, he stubbed out his cigarette and lit another, he traced patterns on the cloth and marshalled breadcrumbs. John stopped talking, and putting his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat he looked at the friendly Punch-like face opposite.

"Now tell me why it won't do," he said.

Mr. Grindrod made those dispositions of his body that argued a speech of some importance. He coughed, and brushed a little ash off his coat. He put his elbows on the table, and leaning forward, looked earnestly at John. He took a deep breath. He felt he was in the presence of Cosmic thought and he was doing his best to live up to it. Here was not John Klooner, his lodger, but a man to whom there had been vouchsafed an Idea, one which to Mr. Grindrod sounded good.

"When I was a boy," said Mr. Grindrod, "I lived in the country—Ashberry in Somerset. My father was the gardener at a big house. I used to go round the gardens with him. There was a big oak tree in the meadow behind our cottage and I can remember the first time I picked up an acorn."

This speech was delivered with so oracular an air that it slightly annoyed John.

"Well?" he said. "So what?"

With a melodramatic movement, Mr. Grindrod swept his platoon of crumbs off the table.

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"An oak tree ain't much like an acorn," he replied. "That's what." There was a pause. Then Mr. Grindrod spoke again.

"You've got an acorn there, mister," he said.

It was evident that Mr. Grindrod was a complete convert. He thought a few moments more.

"In one way," he said, "we're all right. The idea's in hand, as you may say. All you need to do now is to tell everybody in the world about it."

"That," agreed John, "is what it comes to."

"Well—it's been done," said Mr. Grindrod. "Look at Beecham's Pills. There's hardly anyone but what's heard of 'em. It's all advertising, me boy. You've got the idea. Now concentrate on advertisin'—and for that, you want money. Someone with money has got to back you."

The thing was entering the realm of practical politics, it appeared. Another human being was taking the idea as seriously as John. Its empire had extended to include one house. With that unerring instinct for distinguishing between thought that can be carried on sitting down and that which cannot, John's legs hoisted him up. He put his hands in his pockets and began to pace to and fro.

"It's a bigger thing than Beecham's Pills," he said, looking at the worn rug under his restless feet. "They're known only in England. My Idea will have to be adopted throughout the world."

Mr. Grindrod agreed with ponderous nodding. "Course," he said, "Beecham's Pills is only national. Quite a local job compared to yours."

"You see," said John, stopping and turning dramatically towards Mr. Grindrod. "It's got to be world-wide. I couldn't countenance a policy which weakened my own country. All countries must come under the sway of the Idea."

"Sure," said Mr. Grindrod. "World-dominion, as you may say." He felt in his hat. "You haven't got a fag, have you? I've smoked me last."

John, still immersed in the thoughts of a moral conqueror, produced his cigarette case. It contained only one cigarette.

"Thanks," said Mr. Grindrod, taking and lighting it.

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"When you think," said John, "of what has been done, the no reason why we shouldn't succeed."

A certain inevitable order had been imposed, by nineteen thirty eight, on thought of the kind going on in the little kitchen. Mr. Grindrod knew exactly what John was about to say, so he took satisfaction of saying it instead.

"Sure," he agreed. He spread his hand. "Look at Hitler. Two three pals and a cellar. And you don't want a cellar. You can have your meetings here." He gazed round the room. "Funny if this place was the start of a thing like that."

The details of initial organizations were forming up in John's mind, with the excitement of a firework display. Himself—a model Fuehrer—Trumper, Gearie—Party Members Two and Three. To be sure, they did not yet believe, but that was a trifle to be dealt with later. The point was, they were handy.

"I'd join, like a shot," said Mr. Grindrod, "if I was any good."

That made the chaps at the office Party Members Three and Four.

"You're in," said John. He would want transport, for sure.

"Shake," said Mr. Grindrod. Over the table they clinched what each meant by the bargain, and the dark world rolled on, unknowing of the party that had doubled its strength and resolve since the morning of that day.

"Now I got an idea," said Mr. Grindrod. "We got to have publicity. And publicity means money. Somebody's got to stump up."

"Yes," agreed John. "The form of your words is pleasant to my ear. But the point is—who?"

Mr. Grindrod passed a hand across his eyes. "Could yer possibly think sitting down?" he asked. "That prowling gives me a head ache. It's worse than watching tennis."

Without a word, John sat down, rigid and comfortless, in case inspiration should diminish.

"Thanks," said Mr. Grindrod. "Now you say Who? That's my idea. I drive an old gent. every morning round Wimbledon Common. Done it for years. He lives in a big house beside the

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Common, he's eighty-one if he's a day, and lousy with money. Name of Drumme—Archimedes Drumme—funny name, ain't it?"

"Funny as ever I heard," said John. "And I love knowing that he's lousy with money. But what makes you think he'd want to give us any of it—that's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Mr. Grindrod. "I do."

"Well, we can't cash in on his senility," said John. "His heirs and assigns would soon put a stop to that."

"Senile?" said Mr. Grindrod with a pitying smile. "He ain't senile. He's one of the cleverest old gents. in London. You should hear him talk. Been to Eton and Oxford, yer know."

"The more reason why he shouldn't part," said John bitterly. "If we wanted to build a library, or endow a school, perhaps. But save the world—no. I don't think gentlemen—real gentlemen—like the world well enough, anyway."

"Most of 'em don't, that's right enough. There's too many people in it for their liking," said Mr. Grindrod. "Yer can see that in everything they do—holidays where there's nothing on the beach but crabs, clubs where all the other members are going to die any minute—and this secret language of theirs—yer've seen that?"

"No," said John, astonished. "What language?"

"Yer can see it on their party invitations, f'rinstance," said Mr. Grindrod seriously, "Letters—R.S.V.P.—at the bottom."

John snorted. "Rot," he said. "That's only a request, in French, for a reply."

"That's what they say," replied Mr. Grindrod darkly. "Proper secret society it is. I could tell yer things about 'em. But Mr. Drumme's different. He's a man of Ideas himself. We have long talks of a morning. You leave this to me. I'll tell him about our Idea."

John passed the proprietary plural.

"Well," he said, glancing at the clock. "Money we must have, by hook or crook."

"We'll get it by hook, mister," said Mr. Grindrod. "Yer can't save the world from prison. They won't let yer try."

He rose. "If yer going over to Celia's place, I'll give yer a lift. I'm going that way."

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They left the house and John took his seat inside the taxi to be driven into the Presence of Love. The Presence of Love was known to the world as Celia Dammering, and she lived in a part of Blossomward some two miles from "Cartref." It is in the nature of life, and a fact of interest to biologists that while John did not object to walking home, he infinitely preferred a lift on the outward journey. And this Mr. Grindrod often gave him, for he made the journey nightly.

As they drove along the quiet suburban roads, each was deep in thought about the Idea, and the problem of bringing it to the favourable attention of each and every inhabitant of the globe old enough to understand his own language. There was no other bar—but it was tacitly admitted that babies might have difficulty in grasping the idea. On the other hand, babies abstain, not only from the use of belligerent words, but of all words; and have difficulty in waging war. So that problem solved itself. A movement to keep every human being in his cradle for life was a logical though not a practical alternative to John's Idea.

Suddenly Mr. Grindrod shouted to John through the sliding window between passenger and driver.

"Here a minute!"

John moved to the tip-up seat and put his ear to the window.

"Yes!" he shouted.

"This Idea of ours——" A dog shot across the road. Mr. Grindrod swung his head and shoulders to his right and cried "Werrr!" to the animal.

"Well!" shouted John.

"I was thinking up what I'd say to the Old Gent."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Well, if we ain't to mention war and weapons and all that, what *are* we to do with 'em. Get aht of it," said Mr. Grindrod to a black cat which had a suicide complex.

"These things are in the world. What are yer goin' to do with 'em if yer can't mention 'em?"

"Ignore them," shouted John.

"Battleships and tanks take a bit of ignoring."

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"They're only things."

"Only what?"

"Things! Things!" yelled John. And seeing that Mr. Grindrod did not catch the word he screamed it yet again. "*Things!*"

"Oh," roared Mr. Grindrod above the sound of the wind and the engine. "Things. Yes. That's all they are, of course. Fairly big things, though."

"Powerless against Ideas," cried John, bringing his mouth as close to the window slit as he could. "Ideas make them. Ideas move and use them. Good ideas, humane ideas, could destroy them. Ideas are the only things that matter."

Mr. Grindrod slowed up, and came to a standstill outside Celia Dammering's home. John stepped out and stood by Mr. Grindrod.

"You see my point," he said, "about Things and Ideas?"

Mr. Grindrod's eyes took on the expression of a boy remembering his lesson.

"Ideas are stronger than things," he said. "Ycs. I see." He reached for his brake. "Well, so long. Tell Celia all about it. And yer needn't give her my love if yer jealous." He grinned, and just as he was about to move off, he ran through his lesson again.

"Ideas are stronger than things," he said. Then he leant towards John. "Though if I was an Idea, I shouldn't care to be in the way when the *Rodney* lets off a broadside."

Still looking at John, he let in his clutch, let out a foul breath from his exhaust and rolled away in search of fares.

CHAPTER THREE

I

AS Mr. Grindrod disappeared down the road, John turned briskly and entered the garden gate of a house called "*Boleyn*." It was a greatly improved and enlarged variety of "*Cartref*." It had taken a notion of appearing in fancy dress as a Tudor Cottage, and like any of us in fancy dress, though looking rather a fool outside,

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was entirely sensible and its own self inside, with water-closets that would have been a great comfort to Henry VIII, and a bathroom that would have delighted its namesake Ann.

As John rang the bell, he felt like a boy taking the stopper out of a bottle of delicious and exciting sweetmeats. Such is the will of heaven. In a moment, the door was opened by the Sweetmeat in person. As she stood there framed by the doorway, John thought that she was the queen of her sex, and that it was a marvel that out of all the thousands of men who must have seen her, he should have been the lucky one. The fact that no one else had ever shown the slightest inclination to hire a horse and give her a compulsory ride to one of those places where it is too late for parents to do anything but pretend that everything was thus arranged, seemed to John a reflection on his own sex. It did not make him either suspicious of his good fortune, or grateful to Providence for it.

She may be pictured as fancy dictates; but it is fair to say that she was dark, and honest to admit that she was, for some tastes, a little plump. However, she was young, her heart was in the right place, and her chief attraction was that John was attractive to her.

He now stepped inside, and the door was closed. His next step was to kiss her, and tell her that she was lovely. This she did not for a moment believe, but was content that John should think so. Through the whispering sound of these blandishments came a discordant noise, like the conversation of men each of whom believed the others to be deaf.

John looked startled, but Celia only grinned and nodded her head towards the door of the morning-room, so-called because the family always sat in it during the evening. Its French windows (for it was conveniently un-Tudor at the back) opened on to the lawn, and it was pleasant enough and sufficiently used to have been called the Anytime Room.

"The Hind and The Panther," said Celia by way of explanation.

"It sounds like visiting day at a Looney Bin," exclaimed John.

"It is," said Celia. She led the way along the passage, and by the solicitous manner in which she held John's hand to lead him, one's beliefs would have inclined one to substitute Blind School for

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Looney Bin. She opened the door of the morning-room, and they entered, John spraying an affable good evening over the company. It consisted of her father and mother, and Mr. Cornelius Shroud, father's friend, who often looked in to carry on a strange process known variously as comparing notes and exchanging ideas. Mr. Shroud was a retired headmaster. He ought never to have been permitted to retire, for his vigour was unimpaired, and he bade fair to mulct a long-suffering Treasury in the sum of his pension long after Education itself was a forgotten experiment in the Age of Transition between Barbarism and Barbarism. He wore a navy-blue suit, and black boots whose toe-caps pointed upward as a result of a long and unsuccessful struggle with the nervous toes that writhed inside them. He had black hair that stood violently upright, black eyes that glared even over a joke, a black moustache that bristled with eager energy, and a resonant voice that had shaken the rafters of many a classroom. He sat now on a chair at the table, one elbow resting on its polished surface. He had no use for easy chairs. They were restful, and he felt no wish to be rested. Celia's father, on the other hand, was a small chubby man with a mild pink face. Taximen stopped for him and accepted words of thanks as if they had been half-crown tips. Policemen stopped traffic to let him pass. Children looked trustfully up at him and shyly took his hand. Animals were devoted to him, and when the mastiff at the "Elms" pinned the baker in a corner of the yard, his own master rang for Mr. Dammering, whom the mastiff seeing, he rolled over on his back like a kitten and suffered his stomach to be rubbed with a dirty gardening boot, what time the baker, cursing, stole away to his van.

When John's greeting fell on the ears of these two gentlemen, Mr. Dammering said in his soft voice, "Good evening, my dear boy. Sit down," while Mr. Shroud looked hard at him and bade him a short good evening, which seemed to promise that he would deal with him after class. John sat down, took a deep breath for which he had no immediate use, smiled vaguely at the assembly, and pretended to relax into the comfort of the armchair. Celia sat on a low stool near him.

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"By gosh," said John for something to say, "that's good. This is a comfortable chair."

"That," announced Mr. Shroud in his voice, which seemed every bit as black and strong as his moustache, "is what's the matter with it. Too comfortable. A young chap like you ought not to sit in such a chair. I'm seventy-five, my boy, and I wouldn't sit in a chair like that—no, not if I were a hundred and seventy-five. It saps the energy. That's what it does. Saps the energy."

Mr. Shroud loved saps. It was a word that suited his voice as well as his purpose.

"Oh, well," said John, "every man to his taste. Give me a bit of comfort after a day's work."

"No!" cried Mr. Shroud, "that's where you're wrong. There's too much to do in the modern world for comfort. We must be up and doing."

Up was another of them. Just like twanging the string of a bass viol.

"Doing what, Mr. Shroud?" asked Celia, innocently.

"Oh, just doing," said Mr. Dammering in his gentle voice. "Corny likes doing things."

"Rot, my dear Dammering," cried Mr. Shroud. He seemed to have all the twanging words on call. "Pure rot. I believe in having a policy in all matters. Small as well as great. Great as well as small. And Policy is the fruit of deliberation."

The mere vigour with which Mr. Shroud delivered himself of a sentiment, not only lent it apparent meaning, but dragged one in to challenge it, whether it meant anything or not. This may have been the result of forty years teaching, for a man who has been obliged to utter an average of millions of words per annum must be hard put to it to make them all mean something. He may sometimes be compelled, for economic reasons, to substitute emphasis for content.

Nothing could have been more in line with John's immediate experience than Mr. Shroud's last remark, although the tone in which it was spoken was like a glove thrown at the feet.

"Policy is certainly the fruit of deliberation," said John. "But what has that to do with your remark about Doing Things?"

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Mr. Shroud clapped an eye. Let us be content to say just that. He clapped an eye. John nearly quailed.

"What has Policy to do with Doing?" he said, as if the words were coffee and he a grinder—astonished coffee and an incredulous grinder. "My poor lad, what Doing can there be without Policy. Think of the ape, my friend, the bee, the elephant, the giraffe."

He glared at John. "Think of them—think, now."

"I do," said John. "And it makes me feel like a Zoo. Why should I go on with it?"

"Like a Zoo," snorted Mr. Shroud. "A poor jest. I mean that these creatures are actuated by instinct, but we by reason—we have Policy Making Power, and it is our duty to use it. Then we can proceed to doing. But a generation that sits in easy chairs at home and in cinemas and bars will neither form a Policy nor be inclined to Do anything."

He seemed to be in quite a rage about the matter, for he sat back in his chair and simmered, tapping the table with his fingers and breathing hard through his moustache. There was a silence. Celia whistled quietly through her teeth and tried not to giggle. Mr. Dammering almost closed his eyes and smiled pleasantly on everyone. Mrs. Dammering, who was sitting near the window making table-mats for somebody's daughter's wedding, looked at the clock.

"It is," she remarked, in a triumphant tone.

"Is what?" asked Mr. Dammering.

"Twenty past the hour. There's nearly always a silence at the twenty past. Strange."

If Mrs. Dammering had made this remark once in the course of her married life, she had made it hundreds of times, and it was a source of great comfort to her, because she liked things that happened regularly. Things happening in threes, this silence rule, rubbing warts with wedding rings—in her experience they always came off, and she liked to feel that no one was fiddling about with the supernatural. A silence at ten minutes to, would give her an anxious five minutes till she had seen quite clearly that it was a silence too short to count, or so long that it wasn't really in that bit—was, so to speak, an end in itself.

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Mr. Shroud was just putting on his record about the folly of superstition, had, in fact, poised the needle, when Mr. Dammering spoiled his intention by reverting to the noisy muttons John had heard when he came into the house.

"To get back to what we were discussing when John came in," he said.

"Discussing! Gosh!" said Celia. "I should have said you were performing an operation on it—without anæsthetic."

"Not at all," said Mr. Shroud. "We were comparing notes—exchanging ideas—that's all."

"What with?" asked Celia. "Shovels?"

Mr. Shroud laughed. It was an astonishing thing to hear him laugh. It sounded like a playful steam-hammer hitting a heap of scrap iron.

"Very good. Very good," he cried. "With shovels. She's got wit, Dammering. We may have raised our voices a little, my dear, in the heat of the exchange." He became serious again. "I want to tell you young people," he said, "there's nothing like an exchange of ideas. It's refreshing. It's an education in itself. A man gains in stature by it—so long as all is done in good humour."

"Quite," said Celia.

"Quite," said Mr. Shroud happily. He ventured a quotation. "As iron sharpeneth iron,' you know."

"Very apt," remarked Celia. "Very well quoted."

"Yes, I think it is," said Mr. Shroud complacently. "Now, Dammering, my boy. *Retournons à nos moutons.*" Mr. Shroud rubbed his hands and cackled gleefully, though whether from expectation of pleasure to come, or appreciation of his powers as a linguist did not appear. Nor as yet had it appeared who was the Hind and who the Panther, though a very superficial examination might have led to a working theory.

"We were discussing Munich, John," said Mr. Dammering. "And Corny was just regaling me with his views on the psychology of the German people. I won't tell you what had passed, but will just say that I have never heard"—and here Mr. Dammering leaned forward in his chair, his face gradually became a richer pink, his lips nearly vanished as he showed his teeth, and his quiet charm dis-

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appeared—"I have never heard such a farrago of nonsense fall from the lips of another man in the whole of my life."

Like a boxer still in his corner awaiting the bell, like a fierce hound still on the leash, Mr. Shroud fixed a gaze at which a man could have warmed his hands, on Mr. Dammering.

"I will content myself by saying that he blames us—he blames us—for the murderous intentions of the Germans. He says"—Mr. Dammering drew a deep breath—"He says that they suffer from an isolation complex, whatever that may be, and suggests that a series of large-scale visits—Germans to Britain—Britons to Germany—would remove this. He is pleased to call this a Policy of the Human Touch, and quotes Kipling—*Kipling!*—in his support."

With a glare that sat on his cherubic face as ill as a revolver on a wedding cake, Mr. Dammering sat back and awaited the charge. He had not long to wait.

"The disadvantage," said Mr. Shroud, "of a wholly untrained mind, a mind rotted with the base contacts of commerce"—Mr. Dammering was a successful draper, with three shops at Lewisham—"is that a man cannot even represent properly what another has said. Or, worse still, he maliciously misrepresents it. That is not what I said. I will not say that such a man is a liar. I will not even say that he is wilfully perverting the truth. I will charge him with ignorance only."

"Corny," said Mr. Dammering, "you know damn well that what I said you said, you said."

"I said nothing of the kind," cried Mr. Shroud. "I am not such a fool."

"What did you say, then?" demanded Mr. Dammering viciously.

"Tell us again yourself. I'll keep perfectly silent."

This was difficult, for if Mr. Dammering's summary was not what Mr. Shroud had said, Mr. Shroud was damned if he could now think what it was he had said.

"No," he said firmly. "Give us a treat. Let us hear, out of your wisdom, what your policy is. What would you do with the Germans?"

"Shoot the lot," said Mr. Dammering.

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A great number of people have prescribed this cure. It is a phrase that relieves the feelings without committing one to the tedious necessity of working out the difficulties of putting eighty-five million people to death by this apparently quick, but, in fact, very wearisome and—in view of the cost of labour—expensive method. But it was quite clear that pleasant little Mr. Dammering meant it. It was also quite clear who was the Hind and who the Panther.

"What did you say?" boomed Mr. Shroud in as shocked a tone as a voice like his could manage.

"You heard me," replied Mr. Dammering. "I said, shoot the lot."

John, his mind full of the very different implications of the Idea, stared at the two Comparers of Notes and Exchangers of Ideas. There sat Mr. Dammering, a plump little draper in his carpet slippers, with a face like a hospital subscription list, having just condemned an inconceivably large number of unknown persons to a sudden death. And there sat Mr. Shroud, fierce, black and resonant, who had been reported as thinking and saying that you could very soon cure the present troubles by a series of large school outings. What so fierce as mass murder? What so mild as a school excursion?

"Dammering," said Mr. Shroud, "you don't mean that, and therefore you oughtn't to say it."

"I do mean it," said the little man, getting on to his feet, and standing before the fireplace. "How dare you say I don't mean what I say? We're in this mess because the world has gone soft." He clenched a chubby fist and waved it angrily at Mr. Shroud. "Soft sloppy thinking—that's what's the whole trouble, and you're as bad as anyone, Corny, with your ideas of curing enmity with tea-parties. Pah! Slush!"

Mr. Shroud pointed a stern and shaking forefinger at his friend. "Dammering!" he cried. "You're a fascist. That's what you are. A bloodthirsty, violence-loving fascist."

"And what are you?" demanded the fascist.

Mr. Shroud rose to his feet. His hair bristled and his moustache fairly pointed, with every indignant hair, at Mr. Dammering. "I'll tell you," he roared. "I'm a man of peace. I hate violence and all who

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practise it. If I had my way, I would have everyone who preaches violence put away by humane means, for the safety of the rest of us."

"That's all I want to do, isn't it?" cried Mr. Dammering. "You call me a fascist. I'll tell you what I am. I'm an Englishman, not a sentimental no-country-at-all man. I want a strong England——"

"Armed to the teeth!" cried Mr. Shroud ironically.

"Yes, sir. Armed to the teeth—battleships, aeroplanes, bombs, tanks, gas, everything needful to keep these unruly foreigners in their place, and give us peace."

The two friends glared at one another so angrily that Mrs. Dammering felt the time had come for her line.

"Now we'll have coffee and biscuits," she said firmly. It was her custom when the Comparison of Notes had gone, in her view, as far as was compatible with the safety of the ornaments in the room, to introduce this little urbane sentence. The friends turned their glares upon her.

"What did you say?" demanded her husband. Mr. Shroud looked at her irefully.

"I said we'd have coffee and biscuits, dear," she repeated.

"He wants tanks and guns," said Mr. Shroud.

"And he wants tea and buns," retorted Mr. Dammering.

Mrs. Dammering left the room as if to carry out these orders, but her belief in the pacific virtues of coffee and biscuits prevailed. In the lull caused by her going, and before either of the friends could get a word out, John rose and spoke.

"Shall I tell you how to prevent war and solve the problems you're discussing?" he said. "Will you give me five minutes of your time for that purpose?"

For a moment, Mr. Shroud and Mr. Dammering looked as amazed as if they had indeed been in the Ring and a weedy amateur had stepped in between them. Then Mr. Dammering returned to his chair.

"By all means," he said, with a coldness that showed he had no premonition of the revelation that was about to come to him. Mr. Shroud sat down too, with as much willingness as a schoolmaster may whose class drives him off the rostrum on to the dulness of the benches in front.

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John took up Mr. Dammering's position in front of the fireplace. In simple and unvarnished language, he told his hearers how the great Idea had come to him, and explained its possibilities. Except Celia, the audience was not very encouraging. Mr. Dammering leaned back in his chair with closed eyes, while Mr. Shroud looked at his feet, and, unknown to John, worked his toes overtime inside his boots.

II

If John had not been so excited by the Idea, if it were not that he thought of other men's minds as being, like Mr. Polly's "wax to receive, marble to retain," if finally he had not been a prey to that common delusion that one's own obsessions are Ideas, and other people's ideas Obsessions, he would have made full allowance for the significant fact that Mr. Shroud and Mr. Dammering were in exactly his position. They both had Ideas for preventing war and preserving peace. What is more, they evidently thought as highly of their ideas respectively as John did of his. Moreover, it was difficult to oppose logically Mr. Dammering's suggestion that to shoot every German was to impose a heavy handicap on their belligerency, or Mr. Shroud's feeling that while social visitation was going on, war could not. Some may feel—as John did—that these ideas were a little too simple to be practical; but he had only that morning counted simpleness a virtue of his own Idea. It could hardly be a vice in theirs. Clearly, the course to pursue was to dismiss all thoughts of their ideas from his mind, and overwhelm their allegiance to their own thinking by the authority of his.

That, alas, was not how it worked out. When John finished speaking, there was a silence of the variety only to be called deadly. Mr. Shroud whistled the Ashgrove quickly through his moustache, and beat time to its charming melody with a restless foot, while he gazed out of the window into the darkening garden. Celia rested her chin in one hand and her elbow on her knee; and looked into the fireplace as if in a trance of thought. Mrs. Dammering was pouring hot milk from a pan into a jug, but as she was in the kitchen, this did not count as a reaction. Mr. Dammering stared at

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John for a few seconds with a face as round and pink and solemn, and eyes as wide and blue as a baby's. Then a chuckle escaped his lips; the chuckle became a laugh, and the laugh a roar, and the roar a hopeless gurgling. He stopped for breath, renewed the thought of the jest and began again, peal upon peal. John's face turned red and took on an extremely ugly expression. Mr. Shroud, who for a while had looked solemnly on at his friend's mirth, began to shake a little, and then to laugh gratingly. He pulled at his moustache, grinned, chuckled and finally roared as heartily and much more loudly than Mr. Dammering. John clenched his fists and looked angrily from one to the other. Then he glanced down at Celia, to make contact with sanity. But to his horror, she was shaking with silent laughter and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. She looked up at John, her eyes swimming with tears of suppressed merriment, and saw his expression.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't help it."

A yelp from her father and a roar from Mr. Shroud set her off again. The thread of sanity was snapped. The door opened and Mrs. Dammering appeared with a tray bearing coffee and biscuits. She stared, smiled, walked over to the table and put down the tray.

"Well," she said, surveying the group. "What's the joke?"

This simple question appeared to add fuel to laughter. John clenched his teeth, put back his head, raised his fists, and ejecting the words like bullets, yelled, "Stop it!"

This had, though not instantaneously, the desired effect. The noise died away to an occasional gasp and sob. Mrs. Dammering poured out and handed round coffee. John indignantly declined his. Mr. Dammering wiped his eyes.

"That's the best laugh I've had in years," he said appreciatively. "And I've never seen you laugh so much, Corny."

He sipped his coffee and his shoulders gave a last shake.

"Laughter," observed Mr. Shroud, "is a tonic, due to the fact that the lungs get an unaccustomed brushing with air, and the whole system is braced up by the experience. I must say I enjoyed that. Yes." He raised his cup to his hostess. "I must also say the coffee is especially delicious to-night, Mrs. Dammering."

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John felt that it ought to be possible to proceed against persons for moral rape. Not one word of comment, favourable or unfavourable. Just insane laughter, and then the resumption of banalities. On the instant, he formed the theory, commonly held by the new European politic, that everyone over thirty must be muzzled or liquidated, as being beyond the hope of political conversion.

"Aren't you having coffee, John?" asked Mr. Dammering.

Mrs. Dammering saved John from the necessity of a rude reply by speaking for him.

"John declined, dear. I did ask him," she said mildly.

"What sort of a day have you had, John?" asked Mr. Dammering, in a polite effort to dispel the constraint he observed in the young man's manner. This innocent question ideally cost Mr. Dammering his life. Having slain him with a large vase that stood in the centre of the table, John shook with rage.

"I don't want to talk about the sort of day I've had," he said, looking fiercely down on his victim. "I want to know what the blazes you found so funny about my idea?"

"Oh, come," replied Mr. Dammering, "that doesn't need explaining, does it? I'm afraid you're offended. I'm sorry."

"Oh, no. Not at all," said John. "I liked it. *But what's so funny about it?*"

"Well, well," said Mr. Dammering. "Think of it for yourself. It's funny. It's amusing. But—forgive me, please—it's lunatic. Don't you think so, Corny?"

"That's how it struck me, certainly," agreed Mr. Shroud.

"Oh, it did, did it?" said John. "Well, that's how your cackles struck me. I felt I was the only sane person in the room."

"There you are," said Mr. Dammering, as if that proved something.

"And, what about your ideas?" went on John. "What about your plans for saving peace? You'd shoot all the Germans—you who won't even buy a fly-paper because you can't bear the sight of so many in mortal struggle. Have you thought about your notion? Do you know how long it would take? Or who'd bury the dead? Perhaps you've invented a peripatetic bullet that would call

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at every house, and maybe you've arranged in your mind for every man to be his own undertaker, his own parson, and his own gravedigger? Eh? Have you? And you"—turning to Mr. Shroud—"you'd arrange nice peaceable tours, forty-five million from this side to visit eighty-five million on the other. A bit hard on us when it's their turn to come here, eh? Two to one. Or perhaps you've got lists of all the really nasty ones from both sides—the ones that need your cure. Never mind the others. You'll need to send Mr. Dammering, won't you? He's going to shoot the lot, and that would spoil your plans—there'd be nobody for us to visit, unless we get a bit suspicious of the French or the Czechs or someone. And the joke is, you evidently believe in your cures. Can't you see who are the lunatics around here?"

"And you think, my poor boy," said Mr. Shroud, "that by making people abstain from the use of certain words—have you heard of a bird called the ostrich?"

"Don't let's start that Zoo business again," pleaded John. "Let's leave the animals out of this."

"Very well," said Mr. Shroud. "Very well. Do you seriously tell us that you believe in your Idea?"

"Certainly. With all my heart," said John.

Mr. Shroud looked at Mr. Dammering, and Mr. Dammering looked at Mr. Shroud. It was two to one about lunatics.

"Do have a cup of coffee, John," said Mrs. Dammering.

In desperation, clutching at solid values in a shifting fluid world, where everyone thought everyone else was mad, John accepted a cup of coffee, though there are those who regard coffee as poison.

III

After coffee, Celia and John had gone into one of the front rooms where there was a piano. Celia was a student at the Royal College of Music, and there were moments when John liked her to play to him. In view of the abundance of savage breasts, Celia thought there ought to be such a moment to-night. When they had gone, conversation in the other room turned for a while upon John.

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"Did you ever hear such a half-baked idea?" asked the murderous Mr. Dammering, lighting his evening cigar.

"Never. Upon my word, I never did," replied Mr. Shroud, his peaceful tour policy still lodged as firmly as before in his head. "And what's more, he believes in it—unquestioningly."

Mr. Dammering blew out cigar smoke.

"You know, I'm just a little concerned," he confessed. "I never thought him very well-balanced mentally. Look at his eyes. But for all this bantering about lunatics, I'm not so sure he's sane. You know what I mean—on many points, yes, maybe. On some, no."

"Notoriously," said Mr. Shroud. "This one of his Idea."

"Notoriously that," agreed Mr. Dammering. "It's a matter for a little concern. Mm."

"Quite," said Mr. Shroud heavily. It was Dammering's daughter John was proposing to marry, after all. "Quite."

Mrs. Dammering looked up from her work.

"You're getting along fine now, aren't you?" she said.

IV

Meanwhile, in the other room, Celia was playing softly to John, who sat broodingly in a deep armchair.

"Celia," he said suddenly.

Celia stopped playing and turned towards him. "Yes?" she said.

"Those old men are lunatics, you know. Seriously. On this point, certainly. Maybe on others."

"Oh, no," she replied. "They don't mean half they say."

"But they do. That's what's so alarming. If your father could pull one trigger and slay the entire German people, he'd do it."

"Yes. I think he would."

"Well"—John looked at the fingers of his right hand—"he'll be the grandfather of our children. And as for old Shroud—he thinks each country is a large schoolroom."

"Is that so very insane?"

"It's no better and no worse than thinking he's a piece of toast. The point is it's just not reality." John rose and put his hands in his

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pockets. "Have you ever noticed, when you've been looking closely at people, how odd they seem. It's like looking at a familiar word for a long time. You suddenly see how weird it looks, when ordinary meaning goes out of it. Same with a face—two eyes looking straight front like a bird of prey, a dome above it like some monstrous bladder, holes all over it for sound and air—a man looks like a monster of lunacy. In fact, he's a nightmare if you look long enough to get rid of the familiar associations with his face."

"That sounds like the conversation of a lunatic," said Celia, playing a few comforting chords. John came to the piano and stood beside her.

"What do you think of my idea?" he said. "You laughed enough. But I put that down to the hysteria those lunatics produced. What do you think of it?"

"I don't know. I must think about it," replied Celia. "But if you want to do anything about it, I'll play. At least there's no harm in it."

"Mm," said John. Celia was, after all, Mr. Dammering's daughter. It might take some time to get her safely through that convalescence.

"Well," he said, "I must go."

"I'll walk to the end of the road with you," said Celia.

As John found his hat and gloves in the hall, he was very thoughtful.

"I don't care a damn," he said, "about old Shroud. But I'm worried about your father."

CHAPTER FOUR

I

LITTLE knowing that a recipe for its salvation had been vouchsafed to one of the humbler of its citizens, the world rolled on into the misty birth of the next September day. Anxious and depressed foreign statesmen took up their burden of care once more, millions of workers their tasks; and John Klooner went to his office in Piccadilly.

Mr. Gassdrop having disposed, by a supreme effort of diplomacy,

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of the menace to his well-being, was in manner just as usual, and—who knows?—in secret financial intention also. But about half-past ten, the routine of the office was disturbed by the entrance of two gentlemen, who were evidently Princes in the realm of Village Estates Building Society Limited. One of them was a small man with a black trilby hat and a tightly-rolled umbrella. His face was thin, his cheeks were hollow, and his black beard jutted forward with a mingled suggestion of authority and enquiry. Well might it do so, for it belonged to Mr. Sebastian Carver, the Chairman of the Company. His companion was a heavily-built bald man, with shoulders whose stoop seemed to be doing reverence to the greatness of Mr. Carver, whom he followed like a respectful plumber's mate, even to the carrying of the only bag they had between them, a fat brief case of bright yellow leather. He was Mr. Wilfred Trebbe, the Chief Accountant of the Society.

They entered as by right. Such was their manner that one felt that physical barriers intended to cramp the forwardness of customers ought to melt away and afford them free passage without the humiliating opening of doors and raising of counter-flaps which were the lot of lesser men.

Their appearance at the counter of the general office had an immediate effect upon the workers. Every man applied himself to his task with theatrical assiduity. Mr. Gearie looked with myopic intensity at his ledger, running his finger rapidly down a column of names and addresses that he knew by heart, and adding them up to the company's profit. Mr. Slogrund signed a piece of sandwich wrapper, and then flipped over a pile of blank forms with a purposeful finger.

Mr. Trumper was talking on the telephone to a very rude client who was indignantly criticizing the tone of a letter—from Mr. Trumper—reminding him of payments so much overdue as to have aped the tricks of the National Debt. The client was taking the full value of the two pennies he had thrust into a black box in a public telephone booth at Camberwell. Such was the volume of his vocal effort that he might have saved his twopence, for, to such a voice, Piccadilly is no great distance from Camberwell.

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Mr. Trumper was not the man to be bullied. He too had a powerful voice and fixed opinions about clients.

"Don't shout at me," remarked the client.

"I'd do more than shout," roared Desmond, "if I were in your company. Pay what you owe, or you know what'll happen."

"I'll have you sacked, you saucy bastard," shouted the distant client.

This was the moment at which Mr. Sebastian Carver and Mr. Wilfred Trebbe walked into the office. Mr. Trumper knew that in their expressed view, the customer was always right. A smile so unctuous that it was a pity the client could not see it appeared on Mr. Trumper's face.

"Certainly, Mr. Barebones," he said genially. "Certainly."

"What!" cried the astonished client, looking at the telephone as if it had taken the conversation in hand itself.

"We shall be delighted to accommodate you, sir."

"Here," said the client distrustfully, "don't you try to be funny."

Mr. Trumper kept a watchful eye on the visitors. John had risen and gone to meet them, a deferential smile on his face.

"No, no. Not at all," replied Mr. Trumper, with hearty bonhomie.

John raised the counter-flap. "Good morning, sir," he said with the greatest affability. "Good morning, Mr. Trebbe."

"Good morning," said Mr. Carver briefly and impersonally. Mr. Trebbe nodded. They passed through into the office, John holding up the flap with the ceremony of a deacon admitting visiting preachers to a pulpit.

"You want to see Mr. Gassdrop?" asked John solicitously. Mr. Carver nodded, making for the Manager's door. John, by a swift effort, got in front, tapped on the glass and opened the door. Mr. Carver walked in, followed by Mr. Trebbe, and the door closed. Mr. Trumper saw them vanish. He clutched the telephone, and looked at it as if it were Mr. Barebones. As a matter of fact, it was better-looking and a great deal cleaner.

"Now look here, Mr. Barebones," he said, between clenched teeth, "I've no time to waste on the likes of you. If we don't receive

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payment within the next seven days, you'll be sorry you ever heard of us."

With a satisfied smile he banged down the receiver. In Camberwell—cut off now from Piccadilly—the constable on point duty walked over to the box and opened the door. He looked sternly at Mr. Barebones. "That's enough of that," he said. "People can hear it over the traffic, and there's an infants' school only a mile down the road."

In the office every man looked at John with one question on his face. Mr. Trumper voiced it. "Have you spilt the beans?" he asked.

"No," said John, shaking his head. "It can't be about that. It may be about a big deal—or maybe just a routine call."

Mr. Gearie was chewing his pen, his head on one side so that he looked like a big bespectacled dog with a small thin bone.

"Routine nothing," he said. "Sebastian don't pay 'em. It's something serious . . ." Suddenly he stopped his inky meal. "Listen!" he said. The young men held their breath, the better to comply with Joe's suggestion. Mr. Gassdrop's voice was raised, and his words—good dramatic unmistakable Anglo-Saxon—carried into the outer office. "I'll see you damned first."

The listeners raised their eyebrows and looked significantly at one another.

"That won't get him far with Sebastian," remarked Mr. Trumper.

"Sh!" said all the others, keener on the original text than any commentary, however enlightening. For a few moments the voices inside the Manager's office rumbled on inaudibly. Joe rose from his seat and moved on tiptoe towards the mysterious door. Then a remark of Mr. Carver's uttered in a loud sharp tone, sent him springing back to his desk like a fat incarnation of the Vernal Spirit.

"Don't adopt that tone," said Mr. Carver, and then continued speaking in a lower pitch, so that his further words were inaudible outside.

"Blimey," said Mr. Slogrund in a tone of awe, and Mr. Trumper rubbed his hands slowly together like a man having a thoroughly enjoyable wash. Suddenly the door opened, and the young men

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applied themselves to their tableau vivant of work. Through the door came Mr. Gassdrop, carrying his raincoat and hat. He glanced not to right nor left, but strode through the office, lifted the counter flap, and vanished swiftly through the swing door into the outer world. Before anyone could comment on this strange and dramatic event, or do anything but stare after Mr. Gassdrop with open mouth, the bell rang, set into startling tongue by someone in the Manager's office. The drama unfolded. The bell was John's cue to go on the stage. He rose and walked smartly into the presence of Mr. Carver and Mr. Trebbe, trying to look unaware that great events were taking place. Mr. Trebbe was seated at Mr. Gassdrop's desk. Before him, spread out around their ring, as if they had been thrown down in a gesture of passionate abdication, lay Mr. Gassdrop's bunch of keys. Mr. Carver stood near the door, as if ready to go, his hat in one hand, the yellow brief case in the other.

"What is your name again?" asked Mr. Carver. This word 'again' at the end of the sentence meant, not that Mr. Carver suspected John of using aliases, but that he had for the moment forgotten, in the pressure of events, a detail as well-known to him as the price of his favourite cigars.

"Klooner, sir," replied John.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Carver, not using the name now he had it, "you're the chief clerk here."

John nodded modestly. The rosy hope glowed in his mind that, having sacked Mr. Gassdrop for reasons to be disclosed, Mr. Carver was going to recognize merit and appoint John in his stead. The cordial thought of sitting in the Manager's room and directing affairs was, for a moment, even brighter than the thought of the Idea. Perhaps if John had had time to tell Mr. Carver about it, the latter would have said, "My dear fellow, you can't do that to us. Think not of the world, but of the company. Do not abandon us in the service of a vague ideal. I beg of you, take the Managership—be unselfish, put loyalty first, do this as a personal favour to me."

But that is not what Mr. Carver said. His next words shrivelled the rosy hope that merit was to be recognized.

"Mr. Gassdrop has resigned for reasons of—er—ill-health," said

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he, lying with a grim joviality, "I am therefore leaving Mr. Trebbe here to carry on until I can make other and more permanent arrangements. You will kindly give him all the help he needs."

"Very good, sir," said John, seeing a foolish hope die as philosophically as might you or I.

"That's all for the moment," said Mr. Carver, turning his back on John. "Now, Trebbe——" he continued.

John, with every sign of respect and willingness, withdrew, closing the door quietly, for which courteous act, in view of its last experience of being closed, it must be considered as feeling grateful. He had scarcely had time to communicate the tidings that Mr. Gassdrop's health had occasioned Mr. Carver so much anxiety, before that solicitous gentleman emerged, followed by Mr. Trebbe. When he had seen the Chairman off, Mr. Trebbe cast his humble slough, wore no more the air of a plumber's mate, and most annoyingly sat with John, going through the files, discussing matters of none but commercial import, and preventing the development of that conference in the gents' lavatory, the need for which was almost bursting the young men.

Lunch-time came, but its usual relish and gaiety were absent. Among several little reforms, Mr. Trebbe had rearranged the lunch rota, so that Mr. Trumper and John took lunch between noon and one, the others to go on their return. "And to-day," Mr. Trebbe had said, with heavy authority, "you, Klooner, had better go alone. I want an hour with Trumper, so he can go with the others at one. I have brought sandwiches with me, so I need not leave the office. There will not be time. One of the girls can go and get me some coffee, and I will lunch while I discuss correspondence with Trumper."

Mr. Trebbe was evidently one of those fatuous fellows who actually liked and enjoyed business, believing that when God rested after the Act of Creation, he still went on thinking about it.

Disconsolately, John strolled up Piccadilly a minute or two after noon. He felt that eating alone was a barbarous and uncivilized act, a shovelling in of foreign bodies, a digging of one's grave with one's teeth. He yawned with boredom, but as he passed the entrance to

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Burlington Arcade, something happened which rid him on the instant of his ennui. A tall figure stepped out of the shadows of that expensive tunnel, and a fierce voice addressed him. "Here, you!" it said murderously. "Just a minute."

Shocked out of his gloomy and boring reflections, John looked up, and saw that Mr. Gassdrop confronted him. Three things were clear. One was that, oppressed by ill-health, and needing a stimulant, Mr. Gassdrop had been to see one of the many doctors with long bars in the West End. Further, he had been standing in the Arcade, not with a view to buying expensive presents for his late colleagues, but to intercept someone for whom he had conceived a strong distaste. Lastly, it appeared that he had been successful and that his wait was now over.

"Oh—hullo, Mr. Gassdrop," said John brightly—or perhaps not so brightly. "How are you?"

Now to ask a chap who is looking at you as Mr. Gassdrop was looking at John how he is—especially when you have already seen him the same morning is at best a little gratuitous, and may possibly be regarded as a trifle airy, wanting in appreciation of the gravity of the situation.

Mr. Gassdrop gritted his teeth. "You bastard," he said, omitting to inform John of the state of his health, "so you ratted on me after all."

People passed to and fro on the busy pavement. The clocks ticked away the lunch hour in that easy rapid manner known sadly to all office workers.

"I don't know what you mean," said John. "I haven't ratted on anyone."

This statement of his universal innocence of the strange offence was no use to Mr. Gassdrop, who was not of a type to care who was ratted on provided it was not Mr. Gassdrop.

"Yes, you have," he said, exhaling hatred and the fumes of his medicine. "You've ratted on me. You told Carver about the loan."

"I did not," said John indignantly. "I didn't even know what he called for. If it was about that, he must have found out for himself."

Of these remarks, Mr. Gassdrop, like a deaf judge, took no notice.

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He raised his hand slowly, and seized John's coat, squeezing the lapels in a gesture of horrid menace. People passing by stared at this breach of Piccadilly manners, but the police were busy with traffic in the too distant Circus.

"Now listen, you yellow rat," said Mr. Gassdrop, his eyes blood-shot and his voice husky, "I'll get even with you if it takes twenty years."

John's blood boiled pleasantly. He hated Mr. Gassdrop, his breath, his flesh, his foul hand laid on the coat and his vengeful eyes. He seized the hand and threw it violently off.

"Take your hand off me," he said, breathing quickly, "and make yourself scarce. I didn't report you, though I ought to have done so. I don't care what you believe or what you do. Now get out of my way."

Mr. Gassdrop drew a long hissing breath, and drew back his fist as if to strike a mortal blow. John clenched his fists and looked so well prepared to deal with a fatal threat that Mr. Gassdrop thought better of his intention and dropped his hand to his side.

"Right, you stuck-up young swine," he said. "I'll dog you till I get you. You watch your step."

With this encouraging *au revoir*, he turned on his heel and vanished into the Arcade, feeling the need, perhaps, for a little tonic after so much expenditure of energy.

II

At the very time when Mr. Carver, Mr. Trebbe and Mr. Gassdrop were having their medical conference, Mr. Grindrod was driving his taxi at a slow pace along the road on the south side of Wimbledon Common, towards Putney. On his right lay those large and gracious houses standing well back in their gardens and among their familiar trees, and protected from too vulgar and inquisitive a gaze by their sturdy and mellow walls, where a man may dwell, so near to London, and yet so deep in an appearance of country peace, in the evening of his well-spent years. On his left lay Wimbledon Common, as exciting, as lovely and as wild as the

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New Forest. On this beautiful September morning of nineteen thirty-eight, the golden glow of the sunshine lay on the bracken and the grass, gleamed happily on the pools that brighten the Common, gilded the leaves and boles of the trees, and lit the expanse of greens inviting Mr. Grindrod's leisured glance as it passed through the spaces between the trees, and lay over and again on the slowly-moving misty horizon. It was, thought Mr. Grindrod, a heavenly morning and a heavenly place. Pearls and cobwebs, and silver and gold, and blue haze were in it; a delicious awareness of invisible London, with its bustle of business, its domes, temples and theatres was in it; cigarettes and tea and home were in it; and life and love and promise and gladness to be oneself were in it. Mr. Grindrod gave himself a shake of inward joy, chuckled, waved a free hand at the bright world, whistled a stave, thanked God for such vague but all-pervasive blessing and depressed the accelerator so that the taxi began to buzz along with a vitality more in keeping with the morning and the gladness of Mr. Grindrod's heart.

Immediately there was a tapping on the glass behind him. "Not so fast, please, Grindrod," said a fat comfortable voice that suggested gold signet rings, cigars and turtle soup. Mr. Grindrod raised his foot by an obedient fraction of an inch, and the taxi relaxed to its former slow pace. The fat comfortable voice belonged to an old gentleman deeply ensconced in the back seat. Warm September morning though it was, a rug protected his legs from any stray draughts that might have slipped out of their place in the calendar and blown a breath of November into a moving taxi. On his head was a bowler set at a jaunty angle, and he cultivated in beard and moustache, both snowy white, a resemblance to the late King Edward VII. Though he was out for a pleasant drive, his hands rested on the crook of a stout walking-stick. This was Mr. Archimedes Drumme, that regular client of Mr. Grindrod's, for whom he called every day at eleven, and took for his morning drive. Only his father, an eminent though eccentric chemist, had ever called him Archimedes. His sister Eleanor, who kept house for him, called him Archibald, in life-long protest against her father's eccentricity. The household staff, led by the gardener, who had been with the family

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since he was a lad of eleven, called the old gentleman Mr. Archie. To the tradespeople of Wimbledon High Street, where his figure, slowly walking along the pavements of that ancient Surrey thoroughfare, was a well-known sight, he was known as Old Mr. Drumme.

At the time of our introduction to him, this golden September morning, he was approaching his eighty-first birthday. Sixty-five years before, he had seen the brilliant summers of a vanished England splash and break in patrician gold on Eton, where his father had sent him to lay the foundations of a bright career. Sixty years ago, he had savoured the heaven of Oxford, the rich enjoyments of an established order, in which a young man so prodigally endowed by fortune as Archimedes Drumme was certain to occupy a high place. But Archimedes Drumme was a philosopher. He thought too much. At Eton he was profoundly and secretly lonely. At Oxford he enjoyed himself with beauty, love and poetry. He absorbed the first, indulged in the second, and published his efforts in the third at his own expense. Finding life as it was in his youth and prime an unsuitable medium for a philosopher, he built up a form of living of his own contriving, and his father co-operating by dying before he could cut this philosophic son off, Archimedes was able to finance his own way of life with the paternal fortune.

And now Young Archimedes was Old Mr. Drumme. The story was nearly—but not quite—over. Its closing chapter was being lived in one of the noblest of those gracious houses on Wimbledon Common. The young breezes blew gently through its wide windows, the new sunshine gilded its old silver treasures, the books eagerly collected, quietly possessed, the pictures painted by now vanished friendly hands, the ancient wood, the thinning brass, the articles everywhere stamped with the melancholy sign of time passed. A young person in the house looked like a butterfly in a church, lovely, eager, transient, unbelonging. And in this web of time gone by lived Old Mr. Drumme, in whose mind lay the pattern, the depths, the winking gold and black of experience which were the real possessions of a life spent in quiet revolt against Things As They Are.

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Some people called Old Mr. Drumme a simple old gentleman, and indeed, by certain standards, so he was. But they were standards he did not, could not, recognize. He was, for example, unsuspecting that a certain kind of tradesman might overcharge him. He believed, also, when a man said he was down on his luck, that he was so, and hastened prodigally to his relief. But on the other side of his life, he was not a Simple Old Man. He was deep, almost cunning, ambitious for a new order, and as eager as the Archimedes Drumme of sixty years before, who dreamed, in the cool green shade that poured poetry and hope over the Isis, of the spreading horizon of a fresh and more Drumme-like world.

It is difficult to tell what may be the private thoughts of a very old man, in spite of the candour of John Cowper Powys, but it seems safe to assume that they are a little conditioned by what insurance companies call expectation of life. If the thoughts of Youth are indeed long, then those of Age may well be short. Perhaps then, when he had tapped the window of the taxi at Mr. Grindrod and asked for less speed, Old Mr. Drumme sank back into those short thoughts that have to do with being comfortable in agreeable weather and pleasant scenery. At any rate, the taxi rolled steadily along till it came to a road on the left leading away from Putney and into the green depths of the Common. Mr. Grindrod took this turn with the certain air of a driver conforming to a routine well known and agreeable to his passenger. He drove along until he came to a kind of bay on the left of the road, where the turf was dry and soft, the trees stood back in a sympathetic and inviting semi-circle and clumps of bracken linked them by sweet autumn smell to wild places everywhere. With exquisite care, and only a little bump or two, which gently rocked Old Mr. Drumme, Mr. Grindrod drove on to the turf and came to a standstill, midway between the trees and the road. The old man sat still in the taxi, while Mr. Grindrod made certain preparations. Standing on the running-board and reaching to the roof of the taxi, he took down a mackintosh ground-sheet, a square of carpet and a garden chair specially constructed, with a very soft cushion attached to its seat, and another to its back. He set down the ground-sheet, laid the square of carpet

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on it, and then unfolded the chair and put it in position, all in a broad pathway of sunshine that lay across the sward. Then he took a wicker basket from beside his own seat and carried it to the sedentary camp he had set up. This done, he returned to the taxi, opened the door and with the gentle skill of a natural gentleman's natural gentleman, he helped Mr. Drumme to alight, and conducted him to the chair in the sunshine. He wrapped the rug round Mr. Drumme's legs, not a word passing between them, and having got him safe and comfortable, opened the wicker basket. It contained a large thermos flask full of coffee, and a packet of digestive biscuits. Mr. Grindrod poured out into one of the enchanting cups of thin china, with saucer of the same, a slow stream of delicious coffee. The fragrance of the coffee joined the incense of the morning. His cup and saucer in hand, his biscuits on a plate, Old Mr. Drumme said his first words since alighting from the taxi.

"Would you care to have a cup of coffee, Grindrod?"

Mr. Grindrod touched his cap.

"That's very kind, sir," he replied. "I would like one, now I come to think of it."

Mr. Drumme nodded and smiled and waved a hospitable hand.

"Pray help yourself, my dear fellow," he said. "And take a biscuit too, if you care to."

This dialogue took place every morning. Each day Mr. Grindrod found, when he came to think of it, that he would like a cup of coffee. Daily Mr. Drumme appeared uncertain whether Mr. Grindrod would care to take a biscuit, and daily Mr. Grindrod removed that doubt.

Mr. Drumme sat, his coffee held with the experience of social ages in his podgy left hand, his biscuit in his right. Mr. Grindrod stood near, in his peaked cap and leather coat, bending forward to drink his coffee, or shake off the crumbs as he nibbled his biscuit.

"Now," said Mr. Drumme, handing his empty cup and plate to Mr. Grindrod, "tell me more of this young man and his Idea."

Mr. Grindrod, full of his scheme for interesting Mr. Drumme in the Idea, had already taken opportunity to open the subject. When he had called for Mr. Drumme that morning, the old man had not

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finished his after-breakfast rest (one hour and twenty-five minutes), so there had been a few minutes available for him to obey the command, "Come, Grindrod, tell me about yourself." If this oft-repeated command had been literally obeyed, either Mr. Grindrod would long ago have run out of material and fallen dumb, or he would have been reduced to reporting, with Proust-like faithfulness, all those details of his mental and bodily life which are commonly held to be without dramatic interest. But the command was merely a vague kicking-off of the conversational ball, which Mr. Drumme pursued with at least as much verve as Mr. Grindrod. It was therefore quite in order for Mr. Grindrod to respond to a demand for news of himself by talking about John Klooner, which, for a space of eleven and a half minutes, he did. The resting time being then up, the drive was begun, and a necessary interval imposed on conversation.

Mr. Grindrod put the things away in the basket and closed the lid.

"Well, sir," he said, straightening up, "you're a gentleman of education. What do you think of the Idea?"

Mr. Drumme fingered his beard.

"Philosophically," he said, "the idea won't hold water. It is thin, it is not original, and I don't really regard it—as you have told it to me, Grindrod—as an idea at all. It belongs rather to the inspirational realm, and cannot properly be called by the name of thought."

"I see, sir," said Mr. Grindrod humbly. "You don't think much of it, I can see. Perhaps it's the bad way I put it over. It sounded very good to me when John told me last night about it."

"Not so fast," said Mr. Drumme. "Not so fast, Grindrod. I do think more of it than appears from my words, and you have illustrated my point by what you have just said."

Mr. Grindrod thought back over his last words and failed to see that they illustrated any point but his own.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Is that so?"

"It is," said Mr. Drumme. "When you have my age and experience——"

"That'll be never, sir," interposed Mr. Grindrod. "At least, I may

live as long as you have, but I won't ever get to be as wise and experienced. No, no. That I never shall."

"When you," repeated Mr. Drumme, "have come to my years and experience, you will have learned that there are more values than one to be considered in any human affair, especially such an affair as we are discussing. What this idea lacks in thought, in originality, in purely intellectual force, is compensated for in terms of inspiration, of power, of drive, of youth." Mr. Drumme leaned forward and wagged a finger at Mr. Grindrod. "That's it, my friend. Youth. The young have powers you and I have long lost. They can be impressed by dreams, by fantasies, by cloudy hopes. They can believe in lost causes and impossible cities. Our nonsense is their faith. This idea seems poor and thin when judged by the cold intellectual standards that rule the minds of such men as you and I."

"Not me, sir," interrupted Mr. Grindrod.

"As you and I," went on Mr. Drumme. "But what is it? A call to all men to stop thinking evil that they may cease to do evil. I could not—and you could not—make that call. But perhaps your young friend, in the rush of power and folly of his burning belief in himself, his fellows, and his idea, can make it."

"I think he can, sir," said Mr. Grindrod. "He convinced me last night."

"He convinced your intellect, Grindrod," said Mr. Drumme.

"And I cannot give you any marks for that."

"No, sir?" said Mr. Grindrod. "Why not?"

"Because it is not an appeal to intellect. It's an appeal to the nearly submerged moral self of man, which can recognize and embrace good without a need to rationalize it at all."

This was the sort of talk which made Mr. Grindrod describe his client as "a wonderful clever man," meaning that no one of ordinary intelligence had a ghost of a notion what the old man was talking about. It was the sort of talk in face of which a chap could only remain silent and admiring.

"I think," concluded Mr. Drumme, "we have here, not a great Idea, as you believed, but a great Force, perhaps a Timely Force.

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I can only hope so. Now, I am getting chilly. We must return home. But send your young man to see me to-night after dinner; say at half-past eight. Do that."

CHAPTER FIVE

I

FOLLIWAYS, Mr. Drumme's beautiful house on Wimbledon Common, was fading into the September dusk when John Klooner reached its gates, and read without surprise (for Mr. Grindrod had told it to him) the strange name painted on them. Even when he heard it from the respectful lips of Mr. Grindrod, he did so without astonishment, for a mind accustomed to the O-So-Kozies, the Gladberries, and the Krazy Kots of the newer and humbler suburbs no longer has a surprise potential. A house is a house, whatever its design, or whatever its occupants or owners choose to call it. It cannot help their fancies, being often busy enough keeping floor and roof apart.

In spite of Mr. Drumme's reported criticism of the intellectual basis of the Idea, John looked forward with a sharp hope and interest to the coming interview, for there is hardly an end to the things a very rich man can do. He rang the bell, and an elderly maid opened the door. He mentioned his name, whereupon she admitted that Mr. Drumme was expecting him. No sooner had he stepped inside, however, than a lady appeared in the hall and stood looking at him. The maid closed the door and discreetly crased herself. The lady came slowly forward and scrutinized John. She was, it seemed clear, an anxious lady. She stood with her hands folded, her body leaning forward, looking at him through her pince-nez, a puzzled frown on her brow, as if she half-expected him to grab a tray off the table or a coat off a peg and vanish through the door. Then, with a hand as skinny as those of the Witches of Endor, she beckoned John to follow her into a room on the right of the front door. He obeyed, and she switched on the light, holding the door knob in

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one hand while she put a finger-tip of the other on her lower lip. She was a tall thin lady, with white hair, and she wore a dress of black velvet with a high collar and a very full skirt.

"Are you Lifeboats?" she demanded in a stern deep voice.

"Lifeboats?" repeated John, looking down at himself and then back at the lady.

"Lifeboats," repeated the lady also. "Are you?"

"No. I don't think so," replied John.

"Then you're Cannibal Children," said the lady, with conviction.

"Certainly not," said John indignantly. "Why should I be?"

"Then," said the lady, as if her worst fears were realized, "you must be the Spanish Prisoner."

"I am nothing of the kind, madam," replied John firmly. "I cannot imagine what makes you think I'm a Cannibal Child or a Spanish Prisoner. I'm as English as you are."

"Oh, no. That you're not," said the lady, shaking her head. She gave John a piercing glance. "I recognize you now. You *are* the Spanish Prisoner, and I may as well tell you at once that your errand is in vain. And let me add that I personally don't believe a word of it. Not a word. Such stuff and nonsense."

She puffed the last four words down her nostrils with angry scorn. It was evident that no real friendliness could develop until the little misunderstanding had been cleared up.

"Listen, madam," said John forcibly, "my name is John Klooner. I have never been in a Lifeboat in my life, and I earnestly hope I never shall. I don't care if the Cannibal Children die of starvation, or whether the Spanish Prisoner is ever released. I am here because Mr. Drumme asked me to call. I was informed at the door that he was expecting to see me. May I see him now, please?"

"You have come here," said the lady, as if she had found the body, "to ask him for money."

"Nothing of the kind!" replied John, trying to look as if he had called with the cheque, "I don't even know why he wants to see me."

This did not influence the lady in his favour. She seemed to feel sure that there was a catch in it somewhere.

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"Admit this, at any rate," she said severely, "and do not beat about the bush. You are a Benevolent Institution."

"What makes you think so?" demanded John irritably. "Do I look like one? It's never been suggested before."

"Everyone is who calls here," said the lady solemnly. "I should never be surprised to answer the door to a Shark."

"Allow me to say that I am not a Shark, either," interrupted John.

"A Shark," went on the lady, "who turned out to be the President of a Society for Protecting the Smaller Fishes. The world," she concluded sourly, "is full of Benevolence."

"That's all to the good, surely," said John in a placatory tone. He could not have made a greater tactical error.

"That proves it," snapped the lady.

"Proves what?" demanded John, becoming peevish. "Proves what, pray?"

"That you are a Benevolent Institution," said the lady. "They all say that. My brother——"

"Oh, I see," said John. "Mr. Drumme is your brother?"

"I am Miss Eleanor Drumme," said the lady, drawing herself up, and announcing her name as if it had nothing to do with John, "and I am not to be deceived, you know."

"I can only assure you," said John, a wrinkle of irritation appearing between his eyebrows, "that I am not an Institution of any kind, but only a man who has made a journey to see Mr. Drumme at his own request."

"Very well," said Miss Drumme, sceptically. "Then follow me."

She led the way out of the room, and John followed, feeling that if she saw what she recognized as the slightest institutional symptom about him, he was as good as out in the road. They went into a large room opposite, furnished with a heavy opulence. In an armchair beside a good log fire sat Mr. Archimedes Drumme, a rug over his knees, a walking-stick by his side, and a large and expensively produced edition of Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy" on his knees. From this he was reading aloud to the other two occupants of the room, who were receiving the treat with a delight that was a little more than manifest. The one, seated opposite to Mr. Drumme, was

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a tall man with a bald head and a fringe of black hair, who looked at the old gentleman with the expression of a lugubrious but faithful bloodhound. This was Mr. Drumme's nephew, to whom the name of Young Jeremiah had stuck for half a century. The other was a small smart military-looking man with sandy hair and a moustache with waxed points, which he played with in turn, folding the free arm across his medal ribbons. This was Major Eltham Chuckes, who devoutly hoped that Mr. Drumme regarded him as The Best Friend. In this rôle, he looked in for a couple of hours every night after dinner "to cheer you up, Old Friend."

As John and Miss Drumme entered, Old Mr. Drumme was in the middle of a passage. He raised his hand, and they stopped by the door. He went on reading.

"'It was Tiresias the prophet's counsel to Menippus, that travelled the world over'"—here he glanced at Major Chuckes, who smirked and twirled the left point—"Even down to hell itself"—and here he looked at Jeremiah, who, it was said, had had his moments, and now smiled feebly at the thrust—"to seek content, and his last farewell to Menippus, to be merry.'"

John gazed at the company, and thought that if Tiresias had been present, he would probably have felt obliged to say his say all over again, especially to Young Jeremiah.

"'Contemn the world (saith he) and count all that is in it vanity and toyes: this only covet all thy life long; be not curious or over solicitous in any thing, but with a well composed and contented estate to enjoy thyself, and above all things to be merry.'"

Mr. Drumme stopped and looked at his hearers. There was a glint in his eyes, and he gave a malicious little chuckle. It was clear that the audience must do something. Major Chuckes had the advantage of a quicker attack. He laughed merrily, glancing first at Jeremiah and then at his host.

"By Jove!" he cried. "Those Old Chaps knew all about life. What Splendid Advice. 'A merry heart goes all the way.' What d'ye say, Jeremiah?"

"It's a nightly marvel to me, Uncle Archimedes, to hear you read," said Jeremiah, casting a malevolent look at Major Chuckes.

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"I frequented theatres a good deal at one time, but I never heard a voice with the natural quality of yours. You read beautifully."

"You," said Jeremiah with his eyes, to the Major, "remark on the text. I on the reader. I think that point goes to me."

"Does it?" said the Major's moustache. "You know nothing of strategy. Have this one with me."

He leaned forward towards his Old Pal. "And without spectacles, too," he cried. "That's what I think we've got to congratulate you on most. Ah, they don't make men of the same stuff now."

He beamed at Old Mr. Drumme as if the old gentleman were his Joy and Treasure, and at Jeremiah as if he were the centre-forward of the Tooting Rovers. Jeremiah looked down at his toes, but his bald crown said truculently, "You wait. You just wait."

Mr. Drumme raised his hand for silence again. "Only a morsel more," he said. "Your feast is nearly over." He continued reading from the book. Sonorous Latin rolled from his aged lips, the delicious sounds heard in the classrooms of Eton seventy years before, unintelligible maybe to Romans of the Augustan Age, but as recognizable as a school tie to English gentlemen of Mr. Drumme's generation.

"Si, Mimnermus uti censet, sine amore jocosque

Nil est jucundum, vivas in amore jocosque."

This was hardly playing the game. The competitors felt a little uneasy. But once an Englishman, always an Englishman. The Major practically bowed to Young Jeremiah and presented him with the opening. Young Jeremiah gave a rumbling cough and passed the compliment back to the Major. Bowing again, the soldier rushed in.

"By Gad," he said, smiling nostalgically, "that takes me back forty years or so."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Drumme with interest.

"Yes. Yes," said the Major, twirling uneasily.

"Where to?" asked Jeremiah, as if forty years were an electric train.

The Major stared. "School, old boy. School, of course. Great days."

"Oh," said Jeremiah, "I thought you meant Spion Kop."

At this little jest, uncle and nephew smiled secretly at one another, and Major Chuckes felt that his feet were on an inclined plane. Old

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Mr. Drumme slowly closed the book. Instantly the Major was on his feet. Jeremiah half rose and then gave him the point.

"Let me relieve you of the book, Old Friend," said the Major, taking Burton and putting him on the table with a reverence that he and his readers might have thought misguided. Again Mr. Drumme chuckled wickedly. The Major, his back to the Old Friend, joined in as he did not know what it was about, and Jeremiah gleamed blackly at John, who was past doubt the next item on the agenda.

"And whom have you there, Eleanor?" asked old Mr. Drumme, looking keenly at John. Not more keenly, however, than Jeremiah and the Major. If Mr. Drumme had been a large bone and the company wholly canine, John's reception could not have been more cordial.

"He says," replied Miss Drumme with sceptical emphasis, "that his name is Klooner, and that you asked him to call." So saying, she gave John a stare with her head well back as much as to say, "Now we shall see."

The old man nodded. "Yes, yes," he said genially. "Of course." He took up his stick. "Jeremiah!" he said, and pointed to the settee. Jeremiah obeyed with as ill a grace as consisted with not losing a point to the Major.

"Sit down there, my boy, where I can see you," said Mr. Drumme, now pointing to the vacant armchair with his stick. "You've dined, I hope?"

Dr. Johnson, John had heard, dined at an ordinary for fourpence, off a slice of beef and a piece of bread. In the light of that, it would seem that a pair of kippers ranked for an affirmative.

"Yes, thank you," replied John, taking the armchair.

Miss Eleanor Drumme stood by the table, her hand on the back of a chair, a virgin of vigilance against that evil Benevolence of which the world was so full.

"Do sit down, Eleanor," said Mr. Drumme. "I declare it quite tires me to see you stand so much."

Miss Drumme, her eyes still on John, sat down suddenly and in an entirely nominal manner on the hard chair whose back she had

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been holding. She pursed her lips and folded her hands. John for his part was not feeling too easy. He had not expected this audience, though a more attentive one no orator could have desired.

"Now, my dear young sir," said Mr. Drumme, settling back in his chair. "Tell us all."

Miss Drumme, Young Jeremiah, and the Major looked at John as if that were more than dare be hoped. Nothing, their experience told them, could be more desirable for them or more fatal to John, whatever his mission. John was silent, collecting his thoughts, which immediately offered all the pleasures of field entomology without the trouble of running, creeping or carrying a net on a long cane.

"Come, come," encouraged Mr. Drumme. "You have an Idea. You know how to save the world from war. You're not the first to be in that position, you know."

Not, said the eyes of the audience, by a long chalk. Several of them had reduced the estate by a few hundreds each. The last one had been a pharmacist with a big-scale process for anæsthetizing the enemy nation immediately after the declaration of war. The one before that was a rivetter with an invention for stepping-up the Magnetic North and so attracting all missiles to those snowy wastes where, if they exploded at all, they would do little beyond killing a few polar bears, and bringing a measure of variety into the lives of the Eskimos. So that was this young man's line. Well, if he could be got out of the house for under fifty pounds—but Miss Drumme shot a glance of bitter reproach at John. It was evident, despite his fair speech, that he was, after all, not a young man, but a Benevolent Institution. John smiled a boyish smile. Mr. Drumme smiled benevolently in return. John turned its melting ray on to the others. He might as well have tried to dissolve the Royal Exchange with it.

"Well——" he said, and gave a little laugh. "Certainly I'll try to tell you about it. It's good of you to want to hear; though I didn't expect so large a company——"

"Don't let that concern you," said Mr. Drumme. "They're as interested as I am."

They certainly were, and it did not require much eyesight or

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acumen to observe it. John, thus encouraged, told the company of his Idea. As he talked, its power, as usual, chloroformed the nasty cold misgivings of common-sense, and soon his eyes were glowing, his hands moving and his voice vibrant. Mr. Drumme nodded his head, and John was inclined to think that Mr. Grindrod had underestimated the old gentleman's intelligence, and overrated his own powers of selling the Idea. The Major's face was Sphinx-like and impassive. Young Jeremiah's shoulders hunched and his head sank till he looked more like a flagellant tortoise than a bloodhound. Miss Eleanor Drumme sat motionless, and one could have mistaken her for a costume exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum. But underneath, a keen eye could have seen a certain immobile anxiety, as if each of John's winged words had been a mosquito, and the hearers tropical sleepers without mosquito nets. They feared, yet feared to show their fear, that they were about to be stung. John came to an end. No one moved and no one spoke. The silence lengthened and deepened. A log slipped lower into the fire, sending up a shower of sparks and then a bright flame. Mr. Drumme gazed at the blaze for a long time. John stole a glance at the other three. Miss Drumme sat, rigid, unbending, glassy-eyed. The Major gazed at the fire as if he there saw battles long spent. Young Jeremiah was staring up at the ceiling, drumming on his chin with his fingers. At last Mr. Drumme spoke. It seemed hours after John's last word.

"Thank you, my young friend," he said. It was as if an ancient of days had suddenly spoken in some early human settlement. There was a short pause and then the old man continued. "All you have told us is, of course——"

Miss Drumme looked for the first time at her brother, the Major took a deep silent breath through his nose, and Young Jeremiah contemplated the toe of his right boot—"Pure nonsense." As if he had touched a button in a waxwork show, the figures began to move. A smile of ridicule appeared on the Major's face, and he twisted the points of his moustache in quick alternation. Young Jeremiah seized his right knee and rocking to and fro on his seat, seemed to hold a service of thanksgiving in the temple of his soul, and Miss Eleanor rose and moved to a position near the door. The

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old man continued. "Yes, it is. Rubbish, intellectual sawdust, old, tried, found wanting. A fair example—and you will agree, Jeremiah—of the kind of thinking too common in the half-educated quick modern mind."

No one ever agreed more heartily with a proposition than Jeremiah did with that one, and the Major added a few stern nods, so disgusted was he with this modern sin of shallow thinking. Miss Eleanor quietly opened the door a fraction of an inch. The Benevolent Institution was within an ace of being thrown out, and that without a penny of Godspeed money. The B. I. rose to its feet.

"Well, sir," it said, rather huffily. "If that's your view——"

Mr. Drumme raised his hand and flapped it at John. "Stay, stay. Not so fast. Sit down, sit down. I have not done yet."

John sat down, but Miss Drumme still held the door ready.

"There's a rare draught," remarked Mr. Drumme testily. His sister closed the door.

"Now," said the old gentleman. "So much for the intellectual side. Young man, you are making the error of measuring the value of your Idea in terms of the Intellect. Believe me, it has none."

"Of course it hasn't," gobbled the other three in their private minds.

"But," continued Mr. Drumme, "in terms of emotion, of feeling, of power, of youth——"

As this rhetorical sentence mounted, the spirits of three of the listeners fell. If the old man could not be stopped, there was no telling what it would cost to get John out of the house. That sentence alone was a cheque for ten pounds. "In those terms, your Idea has value. I have thought of it since this morning when Grindrod told me about it. It is a potential force—who knows?—perhaps a Timely Force. You must tell many people about it as you told me. It does not matter that it is nonsense. What matters is that you believe in it—force comes from belief—what matter if the belief be falsely grounded so long as it be good? You will see my point especially, Major—your experience of battle—men must believe, however erroneously, in their cause, if victory is to be won. Is it not so?"

The Major found himself in an enchantingly uncertain frame of

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mind. He wanted, so frightened was he at the drift of affairs, to say that he had never heard such blasted nonsense in his life. He wanted to agree that what Mr. Drumme said was true. He would have wanted to agree even if it had not been true.

"Yes. Oh, quite," he said, and glanced at Young Jeremiah, who was assessing the damage up to date at twenty pounds at the least, and now, with a savage look at the Major, added another fiver.

"Now I will tell you, my boy," went on Mr. Drumme, "what I am prepared to do."

At this, Jeremiah dropped the nursed knee, and clutched the seat of the settee with both hands. As if she were wearing a sailor hat in a high wind, Miss Drumme's hand fluttered to her head and, finding no hat there, came down again. The Major thought of a man he had once seen face a firing squad, and took what courage he could. It was worse than anything that had ever happened before.

"I propose," said Mr. Drumme, "that you at once open an office and begin to form a great organization. I have thought of its name. You should call it The Will To Peace Movement. I will provide the funds for the office, the necessary publicity, and for your salary and such assistance as you will require."

In spite of his iron grip, a groan escaped the lips of Young Jeremiah, Miss Drumme's face went pale as she thought of other things to prevent herself from swooning.

"This will cost a good deal of money," continued Mr. Drumme.

"Thousands," said Jeremiah. "But thousands."

"I am prepared for that," said Mr. Drumme. "But tell me, my young friend, are you willing to do the work, to trust all to the power of what may be the Timely Force?"

"Is he willing?" groaned Jeremiah. "Oh, is he willing?"

"That's the point," said Mr. Drumme, and looked pleasantly at John.

John was willing. Indeed, the good spirits of the whole party seemed to have entered into him. No one else had any.

"Very well," said Mr. Drumme. "Now go away, think it all

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over and let me know what I am to do—what my part is. And now, good night.”

Mr. Drumme rose, unaided by the Major, and walked out of the room. John bade the company good night, and Miss Drumme showed John to the door. He bade fair to be the most Benevolent Institution she had ever had the misfortune to encounter. By a supreme effort, she summoned to her aid in this hour of ruthless prodigality, years of a rigorous social training, and managed to wish him good night in a choking voice before the door slipped out of her nerveless hand and shut itself with a slam like a family curse. No sooner had they left the room than Major Eltham Chuckes, with a glance of selfless solicitude at Jeremiah, tiptoed out, and left the house by the backdoor, calculating that without actually running, he could reach the “Rose and Crown” by nine fifty-five. Only Jeremiah remained on the stricken field, rocking gently to and fro like a man with a pain against which no drug could afford comfort, much less oblivion.

II

Celia Dammering was a sensible girl. Everyone agreed that this was so. Her mother would say to her father, “You know, dad, Celia’s a sensible girl. Though she’s my own, I must say she is such a sensible girl.” And Mr. Dammering would reply, “Yes, my dear, I think it would be generally admitted that Celia is, above all, a sensible girl.” Young friends of Celia’s, when they ran into one of those squalls that trouble the seas of youth and love, would agree to put it to Celia. She’s always so sensible. The only person among those who knew her well, who did not regard this as the chief of her good qualities was John himself. But then lovers have not as much use for sensibleness as they ought to have. To begin with, it conflicts heavily with those notions on which love appears to thrive; and it has been known to put difficulties in the way of exploits that are otherwise looked upon as delicious. John, therefore, took no notice of remarks about Celia which contained the word sensible. They seemed to him to emanate from people who pro-

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foundly misread her, or who, knowing nothing of her, and feeling the need to say something complimentary about her, hit upon a phrase that you could apply to your grandmother or to the Archimandrite, or to the headmistress of the village school at Much Wrapham with equal justice.

She was much in his mind as he left Folliways, and when he came to the telephone kiosk which stands at the end of Wimbledon High Street, his happy fancy gave him an idea. He popped into the kiosk, and rang her home. She answered personally, and he gave Button A something to think about.

"Hullo."

"Oh, it's you."

"No other. Are you surprised?"

"No . . . I was just thinking about you."

"So was I about you."

Extraordinary. They thought it was, too, but not in the same sense as the cold cavesdropper might have done, reflecting first on the uses to which men put the marvels of science, and second on the reversible nature of the early stages of many telephone conversations.

"How early can we meet to-morrow night?"

"As early as you like—as soon as you leave your office if you like. Shall I come up to Piccadilly?"

"Yes. Or no—on second thoughts. I'll come round to your place. I've got something terrific to tell you."

"Tell me now."

"No. Not on the telephone. It'll be a thrill worth waiting for."

"Secrets?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"I've got a secret, too. Look, let's meet for tea at Hilforth's at Blossomward Circle, and exchange secrets."

"Right. It's a deal."

This was not a fair twopennyworth, but though John and Celia then proceeded to extract full measure, pressed down and running over, from the Postmaster-General, their further conversation is no

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concern of ours, and was of a nature to embarrass us by reason of its close resemblance to many conversations of our own in times past, now happily and with dignity forgotten.

III

The next morning, John knocked at the door of Mr. Trebbe's room, once Mr. Gassdrop's and entered with a springy step.

"I wish to give a week's notice, Mr. Trebbe," he said joyously.

Mr. Trebbe looked up from the ledgers, letters and other nonsense that lay on the desk before him.

"Indeed?" he said, staring at John over his spectacles. "Am I to take that as an expression of dissatisfaction with things as they are?"

"Not at all. I'm quite happy here."

"Why do you want to leave us, then?"

"I'm going to do an entirely different kind of work," replied John, these words slipping golden out of his mouth.

"I see." Mr. Trebbe meditated for a moment. "Is it a question of more money?" And the world slipping down into the abyss, with only John Klooner inspired to save it. He nearly cried "Good Heavens No! What does money matter now? Did it matter in the cities of the Plain?" Instead he replied normally enough, "No. It's a matter of having found more interesting work."

"Indeed? In what line?" Mr. Trebbe evidently did not believe that more interesting work was to be found than that which he and John did.

"An entirely new line," replied John, not anxious for a debate.

Mr. Trebbe leaned back in his chair. "You're a useful man, Klooner. Is it any use offering you a rise to stay with us?"

The shattering trumpet never shrilled higher than in John's voice as he answered this kindly enquiry in one tremendous "No!"

"Mm," said Mr. Trebbe. "That's as definite as ever I heard it." He took off his spectacles and wiped them, looking at John with eyes from which official austerity had gone, being only sustained there by lenses, after all. "I don't want to seem inquisitive," he went on, wiping rhythmically away, "but I must confess I'd like to know

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what this new line is, unless, of course"—he smiled—"you're sworn to secrecy about it."

John looked at old Trebbe with his unclad eyes, his bald head and his sense of false security. After all, he had to be saved too, and now was as good a time as any to let him know it.

"Not at all," he said. "I've been appointed Organizer of a Movement to save the world from the war that will otherwise come."

Mr. Trebbe put on his spectacles to view this challenge in comfort. He leaned back and fingered his chin. He stared for a while, and then smiled suddenly. "You'll need to hurry," he said. "I'll give it another six months before the balloon goes up."

"That," agreed John, "is the whole point."

"But—joking apart," said Mr. Trebbe, sobering down after this unwonted burst of gaiety and frivolity, "what is the new job?"

"I'm not joking," replied John with grave intensity. Then he told Mr. Trebbe about the Idea. Mr. Trebbe listened, making patterns on his blotting-paper with his forefinger. When John had finished, he looked up, but John could not see that Mr. Trebbe was troubled by the same anxiety about his mental health as had been Mr. Dammering and Mr. Shroud.

"And for that—a fad that the inevitable war will blow sky-high in an hour—you want to give up a solid job with good prospects and a pension scheme that would look after your old age?"

John raised his right arm and pointed dramatically out of the window. "No job," he cried in a ringing voice, "is solid in a fluid world—no prospect good in a world facing ruin."

Mr. Trebbe raised ironical eyebrows. "You turn a good phrase," he said. "Perhaps you've chosen the right job after all, and are wasting your time with us."

John had a feeling of annoyance that this Mr. Trebbe and all the other Trebbes of this world could sit calmly in their chairs, thinking and talking in a doomed metaphor, employing quiet mental weapons like irony that were in place in an age secure and abiding, but not in a time when everybody ought to be rushing about yelling "Fire! Murder! Arson! Rape!" They stared at one another, the young man at the old lunatic, the old man at the young lunatic.

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"Tell me," said Mr. Trebbe, "in this new job—is your salary guaranteed?"

John assured him that it was.

"Have you—of course, it's no business of mine—have you a written service agreement?"

"No," said John. "I have the word of Mr. Drumme."

Mr. Trebbe leaned forward and put a quizzical hand to an ear that had never played him false before.

"Of—whom?"

"Of Mr. Drumme. He's the patron of the movement. He's a very rich man and he wants to finance it."

"You're very trustful. I should get something in writing, if I were you."

"For several reasons," said John, "nothing of the kind is necessary. To begin with, if you're right and the whole world goes up in six months, a service agreement won't matter. If I'm right—and I am—I shan't need a written agreement to go on saving the world from its own folly. Besides, I trust Mr. Drumme—and though this may mean nothing to you, I don't believe that great work is ever left to perish in the ditch for want of a written word."

Mr. Trebbe gave it up. After all, he had given his advice, and he was all right. He had a written service agreement.

"Ah, well. You've thought it all out, I can see. I'm sorry you're leaving. I think you'd have gone far with us."

"Not if you're right about the war in six months."

"Oh, the company will survive the war."

"But you don't think I shall?"

"No. Frankly, I don't."

"Well," said John. "We shall see."

Mr. Trebbe smiled and held out his hand. "I can't very well wish you good luck——"

"I don't see why not."

"Why, because I can't believe in the success of your enterprise. If you were going to another Building Society—or to a newspaper, where by the way, I think you might do very well——"

"Or," said John sarcastically. "To be a plumber or a gent's out-

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fitter or a grazier or a turncock or a pavior, or anything that is part of this crazy world in whose survival you believe, even while the charge that will blow it up is being put under your chair."

Mr. Trebbe looked with playful alarm under his chair, and then at John. It was now quite clear that he was convinced he had to deal with a harmless lunatic. His eyes twinkled. He nodded his head. "Yes," he said, "that's about it. Put it that way if you like."

He put out his hand again to John. "However, I wish you personal good luck." He shook John's hand heartily and finally. "By the way," he said, "it is this crazy world's survival you're going to work for, isn't it?"

John stared. "Yes, of course," he said in cold surprise.

"Yes," said Mr. Trebbe. "Well, good-bye and good luck."

"Thank you. Good-bye," said John, and left Mr. Trebbe to put on his spectacles and continue peering at accounts, while the world rocked on its way towards ruin.

IV

John and Celia had just finished tea at Hilforth's. There had been a little affectionate wrangling as to whose secret was to be told first. John, who felt that his news must be the weightier, wanted to dispose of Celia's; she, feeling that hers was certainly the better, yielded fairly readily to persuasion. She rose. "All right," she said. "Mine first. But you'll have to walk a little way for it." John paid the bill and put himself in Celia's hands. She led him away from the busy Circle some seven minutes on to a pleasant height that commanded a wide view towards London. There she waved a hand towards a rough hut, some wheelbarrows and planks and the general debris of the builder. John looked at it. He thought it was terrible.

"Well?" he said.

"They're going to build some very nice houses here," said Celia.

"I hope," said John, "that it keeps fine for them. But what's that got to do with us?"

"Only that I'd like to live here. It's a lovely view."

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"Is your father thinking of moving?" asked John in some surprise. Celia looked shocked. "Really, John," she said. Nor was she being guilty of unmaidenly behaviour. The prospect of marriage had been touched on not only as a fair, but a firm one. But then, John had been only a chief clerk at the Village Estates Building Society. To-night he was a blazing torch of hope in a darkening world.

"Do you mean," asked John, "that you were thinking of one of these houses for us—for you and me?"

"Well," said Celia, "I don't propose to live here by myself."

John breathed deeply. "I'd better tell you my news," he said. And there on the high ground, as the September night fell and the lights of London brightened the sky, against the background of barrows and planks, he told her that the Movement was as good as an accomplished fact. He stretched his arms out towards the London he had to save, and his voice rang with prophetic power. Celia listened glumly, picking out bits.

When he had done, she based a question on the bits, a question far-reaching indeed, with a direct bearing on the ladders and barrows behind them.

"And do you mean to say," she asked in an exceedingly sensible voice, "that you've given up your job?"

John stared at her, with not a small capful of wind left in his sails. Not one word about the Idea and its now far-flung possibilities; not a syllable about the Miracle of Mr. Drumme. It suddenly occurred to John, with nasty force, that They were right about Celia. She was, above all, a Sensible girl. There was a silence. Then John said in an encouraging voice, "What do you think of the Idea now?" Celia in her turn stared at John. Her temper, resident in her chest, tried to burst that osseous box. Not one word about the houses to be built where they stood. Not a whisper of comment on her Secret. Her eyes flashed with contempt, and she spoke with the utmost satisfaction that the Truth can offer a sensible human being. "I think," she remarked, "that it's a Pack of Nonsense." If John had been possessed of the convenient gifts of certain of the characters in Grimm's "Fairy Tales," he would have vanished on the spot, leaving nothing but a splanetic cloud behind him. As it was, he

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cried upon her name, not in affection, indeed, but with strangled power. But Celia had yet more to say.

"What was it you called yourself just now?" she cried scornfully. "A Blazing Torch? Well, I don't want to marry a Blazing Torch. I'd rather have a Man, thank you. And if you're going on with your precious Idea on the lines you've just told me, you can count me out. I know I said at first that I'd play, but I never thought you'd be mad enough to *pack up your job!*" The tone in which the sensible Celia said these last words made John feel that if he had murdered a baby, she could not have more despised him. For a moment they glared at one another, Passionate Idea and Angry Common Sense.

"Well," at last said Celia, "there's no sense in standing here like a couple of fools. I'm off, and you can give me five minutes' start. If and when you come to your senses, and decide to find a job we can get married on, I'll be glad to see you. Till then, good-bye."

"Well, I'm damned," murmured John, as she marched off. "She's no better than the old man—as mad as a hatter."

CHAPTER SIX

I

THOSE were the days when one could get things done. Undeterred by Celia's ultimatum, borne up by the sweeping wings of the Idea, sustained by the rare atmosphere he breathed, nourished by Mr. Drumme's support, John proceeded to get them done. In a little over no time, he had entered upon possession of offices at Number Four Stinton Street, where, upon the board at the bottom of the stairs, he caused to be painted in letters of gold the words:

WILL TO PEACE MOVEMENT.

His two rooms were on the fourth floor, and in a commanding rush which was a shock to suppliers even in those spacious days, he had them furnished, the telephone put in, office equipment supplied,

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and note heading and application forms printed. All this assembled round him, and the footsteps of the last delivery men echoing away, he strode to the window and looked out on the London that must bear the first assault of the Timely Force. What he saw physically was a great number of roofs, and a small piece of Bond Street where Stinton Street joins it.

Happy is the man at whose door opportunity never knocks at all, for he has a lifelong reason for his unconquered worlds. It was not thus with John. Opportunity was all around him; it practically smothered him; he would have to fight his way out of it and turn it, by a churning process, into achievement. He dismissed the idea of writing to anyone on his brand new notepaper, or telephoning anyone on his gleaming telephone. In the dialect of the Village Estates Building Society, that would have been doing something. Here it was not. John put his foot on the window-sill, his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. He looked at the roofy jumble of his bit of the West End. How did one begin the conquest of the world. He threw himself into a visionary state and awaited a revelation. For a moment the voice of Mr. Cornelius Shroud echoed in his mind. "Policy in all matters, great and small, my boy. Deliberation precedes action." Then into the void floated the image of Mr. Grindrod, Party Member Number Three—for he had willingly given pride of place to Old Mr. Drumme—and with Mr. Grindrod came the thought of a nice cup of tea. This was the first constructive thought John had had since he tipped the charwoman for taking away the last occupant's cigar boxes. He acted upon it, and within two minutes was seated before a cup of good Indian tea in Lyon's Teashop in New Burlington Street. At his table sat two of those middle-aged rather seedily dressed persons who are collectively described as businessmen. They were talking in low tones, and one of them occasionally glanced covertly at John to make sure that he was not listening. Far was such an intention from the Leader of the Will To Peace Movement. Under the influence of a cigarette and the Indian tea, he was thinking heavily, and relieving the itch on his forehead which such an exercise produces, by rubbing his hand to and fro across it. The conference between the two busi-

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nessmen had reached that desperate stage where there can be recourse only to platitude.

"Well," said the stouter of the two, he with suspicions of John, "you must go into the highways and byways, and compel them to come in."

John gave such a violent start on overhearing this somewhat unoriginal remark that he slopped his tea over, said 'Damn,' rose and left the café without paying. Those were the days of waitress service, yet there was none to say him nay, but only to smile at his folly when he called next day with the twopence.

"Of course," he said to himself time after time. "Of course. That's the answer. The highways and byways."

Thus muttering to himself, he strode into Bond Street, turned left, entered Piccadilly, and in a few minutes was outside the offices of Village Estates Building Society Ltd.

He entered the door, but instead of mounting the main staircase or going into the lift, he continued along the corridor that ran beside the stairs till he came to a dark opening that led to dirty stone steps going down into some underground cavern.

As he went down the grimy stairway, there floated up to him a melodious voice singing with melting tenderness, "Ah, Sweet Mysteree of Life . . ." and in a moment he had a view of the singer. The cavern contained the primordial-looking boilers that heated the offices above. A dismal glimmer of daylight struggled through barred windows and filtered through cobwebs. The air reeked of sulphur, and infernal mountain ranges of coke loomed around and vanished into forbidding recesses in the walls. In other recesses lay nameless articles of rusty metal, boxes in a state of collapse, the litter of a score of offices, sacks from which fluff protruded, and a hundred other mediæval or hellish furnishings for which the language of ordinary men has no word. Surrounded by this kingdom of unwanted treasure, the singer was making a slow but savage attack on a fire with a long weapon of iron. The glow of the fire lit his face, and as he stabbed the fierce intestines of the boiler, he sang with passion of the Sweet Mysteree of Life. It appeared that these were the only words he knew, so that he was obliged to make

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them support the rest of the tune, or eke them out with an occasional enjoyable vowel.

"Good afternoon, Bullfinch," said John. This was not a reference to the singing, for the fact was that the singer was called Wilfred Bullfinch. He was a slightly-built man with a close-cropped head of hair which would have been abundantly black if allowed to grow. As it was, it looked as if he had just served a sentence in a very particular prison, and the fingers could not have reported any difference between Wilfred's pate and his chin. He was about thirty years old, and had for some years been meaning to get a set of false teeth top and bottom when he could afford it. He had eyes like ironical black buttons, and a habit, in reflective moments, of chewing his bottom lip with his top gum. He wore a tight navy-blue suit under his overalls, and never went anywhere without an empty sack, though if you had mentioned Autolycus to him, he would have believed you were speaking of a racehorse.

His eyes did not belie his nature. People vastly amused Wilfred, and often moved him to a little chuckle, his black eyes feasting themselves unwinkingly on the object of their amusement while the toothless mouth emitted the chuckle. Sometimes the mere thought of life would produce the sound of Wilfred's mirth, the mirth of a good-natured but entirely disillusioned man, mirth that lived far down in his throat, as his engines lived in the depths below the offices. Hearing John's greeting, he turned his head, holding the long weapon still for a moment. Then he lowered it, shut the fire-box door, shoved the long poker into its place alongside the boiler, and smiled.

"Arternoon, Mr. Klooner," he said. "Don't often see you nowadays. Gorn up in the world, haven't yer? On yer own now, eh?"

"Well, yes," said John. "In a way."

"In a way, eh," said Wilfred. "I see. In a way." He could make one's most innocent observation take on a significance of the most sardonic kind, turn it into a comment on the artfulness of the world, and in that way he repeated John's words now.

"How'd yer like this job?" he asked, and was consumed with the deep-throated laughter.

"Not at all," replied John positively.

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"No. I'll bet yer wouldn't an' all," said Wilfred, looking at John's good suit, his gloves, his hat, and his shoes; and sucking his lower lip. Then he seemed to switch off his ironical mood.

"Is there anything I can do for yer?" he asked.

"As a matter of fact, there is," said John.

"I thought so," said Wilfred. "Well, give it a name."

"Have you ever been to Hyde Park on a Sunday afternoon?" asked John.

"You bet I 'ave," replied Wilfred. "Better nor the pictures. I go nearly every week when the weather's all right. An' yer can learn something there, mind. They're not all mugs."

"Quite so," said John. "Well, you know those sort of platforms they stand on to speak to the people——"

"Prydews," said Wilfred.

"Pardon?" said John.

"Prydews," repeated Wilfred. "They 'ave 'em in churches."

"Oh, I see. Yes. That sort of thing. Well, I wondered if you could knock one up for me."

The black buttons fixed themselves on John's face with expectation of a rich jest.

"Yer not thinkin' of speakin' in 'Yde Park yerself, are yer?"

"Yes," said John stoutly. "Why not?"

"No reason at all," said Wilfred. "It's free fer all, I s'pose."

He turned away and from one of the horrible recesses, where it lay half buried in coke, he dragged a tall office chair and brushing it nominally with his hand, he set it before John.

"There y'are," he said. "If I lengthen the top a bit an' put a slopin' bit o' wood—just what yer want, ain't it?"

John knew that in Wilfred's hands, the job would take the right shape, just as he knew that if he had required an open-air swimming bath or a paraffin cooker, Wilfred would either have it, or go for a walk with his sack to collect the elements for assembly.

"How yer goin' ter get it there—an' when do yer want it?" asked Wilfred.

"I want it Sunday," said John. "And I suppose——" He looked at Wilfred.

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"I'll get it there," said Wilfred. "I got a truck. Meet yer at the Marble Arch. Two o'clock?"

So it was agreed. For a few moments, the black buttons again stared at John, and the bottom lip was sucked. Then the grim chuckle emerged, rattling ironically in Wilfred's throat.

"What yer goin' to talk to 'em about?" he asked at length.

This direct question brought a vision of the Highways and Byways Policy into John's mind with alarming vividness. His stomach made the tiniest protest.

"You wait and see," he said.

Again Wilfred chuckled, this time with deep enjoyment.

"I will an' all," he replied.

II

It was a few minutes after two on the appointed Sunday afternoon when John Klooner jumped off his bus at Marble Arch and walked briskly across the road and into the Park to find Wilfred with his truck and the pryde. Already strenuous voices were proclaiming the many-sided Truth, small knots of people were listening in the warm air, and the ceaseless sound of the feet of seekers after the Truth-in-Motley had begun. Resolution comes of the fixing of a mood, but this familiar sight was enough to melt the strongest spiritual adhesive. The sight of London's open-air university did not accord with the private vision of the prophet. It was pleasant, ordinary, humorous, hard—anything but tragic, doomful, pathetic, needy of salvation. Only by a great effort did John fill the quiet blue sky with the livid clouds of impending doom, stain the short, much-rodden grass with imaginary blood, and fill the sunlit air with the lire sounds of bombardment; only with an even greater effort did he suppress a severe rush of common-sense to the head, and refrain from leaping on a southbound bus, leaving Wilfred to push his truck where he liked on discovering the perfidy of a lost leader.

However, the joint effort of evocation and suppression making his face sterner than usual, he walked with a slow purposefulness looking to right and left in search of Mr. Bullfinch. Perhaps,

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whispered a treacherous voice, the prydeew has not turned up. If not, its absence would let a prophet out. But Wilfred was not of the stuff of which failures and jibbers are made. Besides, he had a zest for life. There he was, under a tree behind the kiosk where papers, cigarettes and chocolate are on sultry sale for such as care little for oratory, or can only bear it if the palate is agreeably engaged. Wilfred raised an arm, and John went over to him. The prydeew, a useful combination of old chair and newish wood, was roped on to Wilfred's truck. As soon as he had waved to John, he unroped it, and set it on the ground, surveying it with philosophic pride.

"There y'are," he said. "How'll that do?"

John tested its stability by rocking it on its four sturdy legs. "That's fine," he said. "Fine. Yes, you've made a good job of that, Bullfinch."

"Where d'ye want it?" asked Wilfred, with a horrible readiness to serve.

John looked about him, which was a reasonable thing to do; but something inside him made the glance a very nominal one. Wilfred became impatient for the Roman Holiday to begin.

"I should 'ave it on the main path," he said. "That's where the most o' the folks get. What about next to that fat chap? 'E's talkin' abaht how wrong it is to 'ang people. 'E never gets much of a crowd. Got an 'ell of a voice though. Yer'd 'ave to shout pretty loud if you was there."

The truth of Wilfred's caution was made evident by a sudden roar from the fat man who disliked capital punishment.

"Is there a Man here," he shouted in a voice worthy of his great chest, "who can rest complacently, knowing that he is party, as a citizen of this great country, to the judicial murder of his fellows, knowing that such a practice is contrary to Holy Writ, to Common Yumanity, to all the Dictates of the Yuman Spirit? Is there such a man here?"

There was not. A glance at his audience would have revealed that to him, for it consisted of seven children of assorted ages, an old lady with a dog, and three young women, one of whom had

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stopped to do up her shoe, while her companions marvelled at the vocal power of the speaker, and at the perspiration that rolled down his face.

Like one of the victims whose cause the fat man was pleading with such power, John agreed to Wilfred's suggestion and permitted himself to be led to a vacant space next to the Yumane One. Wilfred had put the pryde on his truck and now cheerfully pushed it to the chosen spot. He was setting up the platform of the Will To Peace Movement, when an unwonted quiet fell. The fat man had stopped speaking, and was glaring at Wilfred from his platform, a similar structure, with a large card pinned to the front of it bearing an attractive line-drawing of a felon on the very steps of the gallows. Wilfred turned to see what had inhibited the vocal storm. The fat man pointed a stubby finger at him.

"And what, my friend," he shouted in his meeting manner, "do you suppose you are doing there?"

"Puttin' this 'ere up," replied Wilfred. "Don't it look like that from where you are?"

"And for what purpose?" cried the fat man, with a swinging vocal rhythm.

"This 'ere gent's goin' ter speak," replied Wilfred, indicating John. The fat man's eye, a rather bloodshot and ferocious member for so humane an individual, fell on John.

"I do not know you, sir," shouted the fat man, using all the advantage of the platform manner. "But if that is your intention, I must protest. That pitch is regularly used by my friends of the Forecastle Mission. I am used to contending with their musical instruments, their singing, and even their mass testimony. But the distraction of another argument I cannot and will not put up with. There is the whole park for others to use. Why must you select this spot? It is not within reason and tolerance. I am—I hope—a Democrat. No man can charge me with a desire, secret or public, to stifle the utterance of the Opinion of the Common Man, or to deny his right to exercise it."

Somewhere about the middle of this oration, the bloodshot eyes had strayed away from John, and it became clear that the fat man

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was again addressing his audience. A few people drifted up, and soon the crowd had enlarged to fifty people. John was apparently forgotten, although the speech went rolling cogently on from the point of the fat man's protest. His passion grew, his thought swelled, his thundering utterance poured out into the gentle air. He waved his arms while John gaped at this transference of power from the One to the Many.

"I stand," yelled the orator, "for Freedom, not in one respect, but in all respects. Not for Myself, but for All Men. But—and who shall censure me for this—I will defend, with my heart's blood, if need be, my own right to Freedom of Expression. There are those, my friends, who, under cover of a Sham Democracy, would silence me, would silence you. But I say, in the names of the free men of all time, of John Hampden, of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, that I will never rest until the abuses that taint the Public Life of England, that——"

Mr. Bullfinch nudged John, and with his hands on the pryde, waggled it invitingly and said, "Come on. Get crackin'."

John glanced at the fat man, Wilfred interpreted the look, pulled a face and said, "'E's forgotten yer. 'E can't keep 'is mind on any-thing but 'angin's for more than two minutes. 'E's 'appy again."

While Mr. Bullfinch held the platform, John mounted it and looked around him from that public height. On his right, the fat man detonated at his audience. On his left, a refined-looking man with silvery hair passionately harangued his crowd on the danger they all stood in of being clapped into a Lunatic Asylum on the pretext of being taken to the Lake District for a holiday with their several Uncle Georges. A little further away, a band consisting of three brass instruments played a tuneless assurance that those present would see each other better when the mists had rolled away, a fact which, if there had been any mist on that clear autumn day, no one would have thought of disputing. As it was, the assertion seemed to be a little academic. The other side of the fat man, a rather loose-jointed Yorkshireman—to judge by the richness of his vowels—was upsetting the well-to-do in his audience without placating the poor ones, for his every sentence—about the folly of money-grabbing—

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was followed by a unanimous yell of contradiction, a thing he seemed to find most stimulating, for when later a post-prandial numbness overcame his crowd, he stuttered and halted, became tame and dull, and finally went off for a cup of tea with the Gold Standard and the Faith Healer.

This survey may well have been interesting, but in Wilfred's view it was neither progressive, nor a justification of the labour he had put into the making of the prydeu.

"Come on," he said again. "If yer don't get crackin', yer'll get arrested for loiterin'."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said John in a voice suited to the fact that he had neither the one nor the other. Mr. Bullfinch sniffed contemptuously. "Yer'll 'ave to say it louder nor that," he advised, "or they'll think we're 'ere on be'alf of the Deaf and Dumb School at 'Arringay." He suddenly raised his voice. "Ladies and Gents! There y'are. Something like that."

John had prepared a speech. In a cold despair of dragging anyone away from the speakers all round him, and like a man taking an instant resolution to jump into an icy river, he began to deliver it.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said again, in a terrific voice, made more tremendous by a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"That's better," said the motherly Wilfred below, leaning on the prydeu, and lighting a cigarette.

"You are here," yelled John, "on this lovely afternoon of peace and sunshine, with your wives and your children, out with your friends for a little innocent pleasure. But have you stayed to ask yourselves—is it a real peace—is it secure—is it permanent? I will tell you the answer." He drew a deep breath and hurled the answer into the air with a roar that shook the prydeu and caused heads to turn away from a dozen neighbour meetings. "*No! It is not!* It is a fantasy, a delusion, a snare, a pit, a trap, a mirage; yes, a mirage, a trap, a pit, a snare, a delusion, a fantasy."

The procession of verbal missiles had an instant effect. Passers-by stopped and then drew near; people bored with their present meetings joined John's crowd, and when he withdrew his regard from the blue heaven at which he had been hurling his words, he saw a

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goodly company of his fellow human beings gathered before him. He looked down at them as he spoke. He saw them in terms of head-gear—bowlers, caps, felt hats, smart little creations, terrifying resuscitations; and below them faces, some serious, most heedless and cruel, jaws going merrily to work on chewing-gum and chocolate, cigarettes and pipes sending blue smoke drifting away on the air. But nowhere was there a sympathetic face, nowhere, as John saw it, an intelligent, kindly, cultured sort of a face. Just faces, impassive perhaps, hostile possibly. He felt that he did not like his crowd, and no pang of pity shot through his heart for them; on the contrary, he wondered what had made him think that bombs were such terrible things. However, the immediate compulsion was to speak; and he went on speaking.

The crowd, assembled by motives as mean as interest in a loud tone of voice, ennui with current experience, a desire to be amused free of charge, and the curiosity of the other animals in the one who has separated himself from the herd, now began to get the hang of John's particular complaint against society.

"What's he shouting about?" would say a newcomer at the back, to any who would answer him.

"Pacifist," would reply one of the cognoscenti.

One such newcomer was a thin bronzed young man with an open-necked shirt, corduroy trousers, and the walk of a South American desperado. He was one of those whose mission in life is contradiction. When he was in his infancy, his parents, believing themselves to have brought into the world a monster of unfilial disagreeableness, took him to a doctor, who, tiring of the futility of making pills, had taken down his first brass plate and set up another bearing the words CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST, an arrangement which he found excellent, for it excused him the tedious labour of pill-making, established him as different, and brought in more cash for less physical effort. He learned the jargon as he went along and was able to tell the parents of the ingrate that the child was a negativist. When they had paid, they went away, still sorrowing, but with something definite to sorrow about. They were only the first, for as the child grew he increased in stature and power of

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negativism. Hyde Park on Sunday afternoon was his spiritual home—there was something there to contradict. Saturated as he was in negative feeling, he did not need to listen to John's exposition; he needed only to know from a bystander what it was all about in one word. Hearing the word, he pressed fiercely forward to the front, placed himself right under John's nose and pointed a finger, accusing and negative, at him.

"No, sir," he yelled suddenly, "you've no right to say that."

John stopped and looked down. Mr. Bullfinch took his cigarette out of his mouth, looked scornfully at the interrupter and said, "Git aht of it."

John knew that it would be a fatal error to transfer his attention to the young man, and so, after a cold stare, continued his discourse.

That policy might have worked with some people. It did not work with the young man. He had twenty-eight years of unbroken success behind him. He now set up a wild howling that seemed to be a cacophonous parody of John's utterance. With twisted face, he turned to people near him and let out this terrible noise. John looked down again, put his hands on his hips and appealed to the young man. That was what the young man's mother used to do, with about the same result.

"Will you either be quiet or go away?" said John.

"No, I won't," replied the young man. "I've as much right to make a noise as you have." Whereupon he continued the howling.

Wilfred looked as if he were preparing for a physical attack on the interrupter. John saw that and waved an admonitory hand. "Please, please," he said, "stop that terrible din. These people want to hear what I have to say."

"They want to hear what you have to say?" yelled the young man, turning to the crowd. "Hear what he says? He says you want to listen to what he has to say. Do you? You must be a lot of fools if you do. Let the Noes declare."

This grave intervention took the crowd's attention. There were yells from all parts. People stood on tiptoe to see what was happening, and asked one another what was going forward. Wilfred said hurriedly to John, "Let me punch him on the nose. That'll settle

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'im." "No, no," replied John. "I'll deal with this . . . ladies and gentlemen," he shouted, "this man is trying to disrupt the meeting. I propose to carry on if you will give me your attention. . . ."

"Where did you serve your last sentence?" yelled the young man. The crowd guffawed, and John glared. "You're mistaking me for one of your friends," he retorted. "You be quiet or you'll find yourself inside again. Now then, ladies and gentlemen. . . ."

The ladies and gentlemen all had a pleasant feeling that the young man would bring a little brightness into their lives if permitted to continue his interruptions. They were therefore all against John going on, and looked with bright eyes and hopeful expressions in the direction of the negativist, hoping he was not going to allow himself to be silenced like that.

Their hopes were well-founded. The young man had a technique gained doubtless partly in his nursery and partly from a wide acquaintance with speakers of divers kinds. He now turned to the crowd and pointed a finger of dramatic accusation at John.

"I know that man!" he shouted. "I saw him arrested in the stews of Cairo in nineteen thirty-three."

"I have never been in Cairo, sir," cried John triumphantly.

"Don't pay no 'eed to 'im," counselled Mr. Bullfinch.

"Then," shouted the young man, even more triumphantly, as if the denial proved his point, "it must have been in Calcutta. It wasn't far away."

Instead of evoking the higher sympathies of the crowd, this interchange, and the geography of the dialogue, delighted them. They laughed like little children. A crafty smile which he did his best to repress appeared on the face of the young man. He wagged the finger at John, still looking at the crowd. This was for him success.

"Keep your hands in your pockets," he counselled in a loud harsh voice. "This man has his friends in the crowd taking up a secret collection. They don't take much. You won't miss it—till you get home."

The crowd obediently guffawed. Things were going badly for neighbouring meetings. The repeated roars of laughter worked better than church bells a century ago. The assembly was swelling

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visibly. John looked at the sea of faces, and determined to put a stop to the behaviour of this unwelcome whizzer-in of crowds.

"Now I've had quite enough of your nonsense," he said sternly. "Clear off and let me get on with my business."

The young man folded his arms and looked insolently up. "You get on with it. I'm staying here, so mind what you say."

He wore such an expression of pious guardianship of the crowd's interests that those nearest to him laughed devotedly. John decided to pretend that victory was his. With a look of cheerful achievement that hid discreditable feelings, he addressed himself to his audience again.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," he cried. "We've finished with that disturbance——"

"Oh, no," said the young man. "Don't worry, people. I'm still here. I won't let him get away with anything."

A terrible spasm of rage shook John. He clenched his fists and looked down at his tormentor again. To anyone less grounded in the principles of negativism, he would have looked like a lion—a frightening beast about to strike. The young man must have seen a lot of people, starting with his father, looking at him like that. He folded his arms and nodded imperiously.

"Get on with it," he said very loudly. "Don't keep all these people waiting. Your chaps haven't a chance while you're not talking."

The crowd joyously accepted this witty convention that while John talked their pockets were being picked; and they readily accepted the leadership of the young man to the rich mine of humour that was to be exploited, for John was changing before their eyes from a young man who wished them well to one who most heartily wished them ill; from one who brought peace to one who would have given a good round sum for a sword. As he stood there speechless with anger and impotence, they followed up the young man's suggestion that John should get on with his speech.

"Lorst yer voice, mate?"

"Get crackin'."

"Let yer mate have a go at it."

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These and even less polite instructions filled the air. The crowd was out of hand. John looked at them with a disgust that would never be felt by an enemy airman, however fanatical; and what with the shouting of the young man, and the high spirits of the crowd, who now took to their legion tongues with terrific gusto, like a class which had found out teacher, John's temper burst its bonds. His eyes flashed, his fists clenched and unclenched, and what was in his heart about them came out. It was an astonishing success, but John valued it not. He knew only that he was relieving his feelings. What a joy—accorded to so few and even them so seldom—to tell human beings what they are. To this joy, John helped himself abundantly, and found, to his amaze, that there is nothing human beings like so well. They heap riches upon him that has wit and courage enough to do it, for it is a sweet change after the sycophancy of demagogues and entertainers. He drew a deep breath.

"I thought," he yelled above the tumult, "that I was talking to a lot of sensible men and women. That was hasty of me. I should have taken a more careful look at you."

At these words the crowd fell instantly silent, in expectation of a high treat. Even the young man below was still, and the hush of inspection was unbroken. John's eye swept the crowd, attentive and unmoving.

"But now that I do look at you," he cried, "I see what you are." He drew fierce breath again. "You're Mugs—to a man. You're Mugs." He looked scornfully round at the multitude and said with great deliberation, "And, by gosh, you look it."

So bitter were the tones of disillusionment in which these words were spoken, so charmingly unaffected and sincere the conviction of their Mughood in John's voice, that the crowd roared with delight; for that was the private belief of each about all the others. There was now no vestige of his original purpose in mounting the pryde left in John's breast. The noises all round came ungratefully to his ear. The brass instruments were dolefully promising that when the roll was called up yonder they'd be there. It could not have been called a minute too soon for John. Deaf for an earnest while to the fat man, John now heard his great voice stridently

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announcing his fixed aversion to hangmen. A drop of perspiration ran down his brow and fell into his eye, and all the September afternoon seemed a hot arid despair, a dusty folly. The crowd were so many Dammerings and Shrouds, only intolerably more Dammeringesque and Shroudish. Ideas kept diplomatically secret for years now raised their heads and fired his tongue.

"Some of you," he shouted, "have children, no doubt. I'm sorry for them. There ought to be a philanthropic society to warn them against you, for you're not even grown up yourselves. I came here this afternoon to offer you a solid hope, a policy of safety, and you've turned the meeting into a hippodrome. But I don't wonder. All you understand about life is work which you don't like and entertainment which you dote on. And what entertainment."

John paused for breath and again swept his audience with a look so dirty that they laughed. But it was evident that they found his remarks, which some might have thought a trifle objectionable, most acceptable.

"You wouldn't pay a penny to hear all the prophets in the Old Testament, but you'll pay half a crown to listen to the nasal quackings of a Hollywood duck. You think you're living when you watch a lot of little doggies tearing round a track. You think a book isn't literature if it's not about crime or lemonade love. You think you govern your own country because they let you put a little cross on a bit of paper every now and again. It's a good job that's all you're trusted to do, for anything more would be too much for your brains. Take care of them. Keep your hats on in the sun, and don't sit in draughts in case the worst happens."

John paused again. The negativist took his chance. He put his hand up as if he were indeed in school. "Please, teacher," he cried.

"Yes," said John. "And don't come back. And finally," he said to the crowd, "you remind me of a lot of tame animals in an open-air zoo, trained to wear ready-made clothes, and handle knives and forks with fair success. You can't see the sportsman behind the hedge with his gun held ready to knock you off, nor the trap set ready to seize you round the neck, nor yet the slaughterer lurking round the corner waiting for you with a good long knife. Your

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stomachs are full and the sun's shining. That's all. Now go and listen to my friend on your left. He doesn't believe in hanging. I do, and plenty of it."

With these comfortable words, John sprang down from the pryde, and hurried away, followed in a moment or two by Mr. Bullfinch with the truck and its load.

"Well," said John, looking truculently at the black buttons, which stared ironically at him.

"Yer enjoyed yerself," said Wilfred. "Will yer be wantin' this any more to-day?"

"No, I shan't," said John decisively.

Wilfred nodded. "Righto," he said. "Well, I might as well push off, then."

Just as he was doing so, and John was making an emergency sponge of his handkerchief, a young man rather like a restrained stork stepped, or rather strutted up to John. He wore no hat, and his mouse-coloured hair stood straight up in front. Large round spectacles sat astride his sharp long nose, and his sport's coat and flannel trousers, his open-necked shirt and his brown brogues looked unnatural to him, as if Sunday, being on his time-table, called for some concession in costume which he was secretly reluctant to make, having permanent business that demanded some more formal attire.

"You'll excuse me," he said. John stared at him, and passed his handkerchief round the inside of his collar.

"Will I?" said John. "That depends."

"My name is Murrinkle," said the young man. "I heard the first part of your discourse."

"Did you hear the last?" demanded John grimly.

"Yes. I did. And of course I quite agree. Everybody's a silly ass. No doubt about that. Not the slightest. What I always say is, a human being is bound to be a fool. It's just a case of choosing your folly. But I'm interested in what you were saying at first. As you turned in the idea of telling the crowd, I wondered if you'd come and have some tea and tell me more."

John looked at the storklike young man. One possible convert out of all that great crowd. It seemed a great deal of labour for a

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very little result. Still, it was as yet the day of small things. He put away his handkerchief and resumed the manner of the prophet.

"I shall be glad to," he said. "A cup of tea is just what I want; and when I've had it, I'll tell you as much as you like."

"Good," said the young man, much more like a person who had negotiated the first part of a deal than a convert, "let's go, then."

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

MR. MURRINKLE led John out of the Park and over to the Wonderland Hotel, in Oxford Street, talking as they went of matters remote from the Will To Peace Movement. Whatever it was he wanted to hear—or to say—about that, he was evidently resolved to keep until they were seated before a cup of tea. He stole a sidelong glance at John as they walked and turned it into the glance of a kindly and rather donnish stork as John, moved by a similar impulse, met it on its stealthy way. He averted it then and turned it on to the busy scene before them, the strolling crowds, and the slowly-moving traffic. He waved a hand at it.

"Have you ever thought," he said, "when you're looking at a scene like this, how much more your skin matters than your eyes?"

"No," replied John. "I can't say that I have."

"No," said Mr. Murrinkle. "Yet if you imagine the same scene on a day in January, you'll see my point. To-day, it looks mellow, kindly, vital, promising, exciting. The elements are always the same—people, shops, cars, buses. Your eyes tell you the same things about it. But it's your skin that supplies those adjectives to-day, just as it would report on a January day that the scene was sharp, bleak, narrow, dull, raw. You owe a lot of your happiness to your skin."

"I see your point," said John.

"Good," said Mr. Murrinkle. They stood on an island for a moment.

"Does it matter?" asked John.

"Not a bit," said Mr. Murrinkle. "I often tell people things

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they've never thought of before, and they always think it doesn't matter."

"Well," said John. "Does it?"

"No, I don't think so," said Mr. Murrinkle.

He laid a hand on John's arm. "Now——." They stepped off the island and crossed to the noble entrance of the Wonderland Hotel. Just inside its cool and shady foyer, Mr. Murrinkle stopped and looked very solemnly at John.

"Have you found out what does matter?" he asked.

"Why—yes," replied John, staring at his host and wondering whether, if you scratched the surface of life anywhere, you would find a truly sane person.

Mr. Murrinkle patted his shoulder. "Then write it down now. Yours is a valuable life. Write it down before you get killed crossing the road. Everyone else who ever knew has either been killed or died of old age before he told anyone what it was."

So saying, Mr. Murrinkle looked at John like a cunning bird, and smiled a quizzical smile with his eyebrows and mouth.

"But—look here," said John. "Lots of things matter—you took me off my guard. I can tell you all sorts of things that do."

"Write 'em down," whispered Mr. Murrinkle. "Don't tell me. I might have a weak heart and die in the bus on the way home. Write everything down. You owe it to posterity, poor little devils. Now—that cup of tea."

They found a quiet table in an alcove in the wide corridor that leads to the Salon de Fontainebleu. Mr. Murrinkle beckoned a waiter, and waggled his fingers at the table.

"Tea, sir?" said the waiter gravely.

Mr. Murrinkle nodded.

"China, sir?"

"I can drink no other," said Mr. Murrinkle, opening wide eyes of enquiry at John, who nodded, and Mr. Murrinkle nodded too, and waved the waiter away with a wafting gesture.

"Now," he said, leaning back and crossing his legs. "Now we can talk."

"Well," said John, smiling, "what do you want to know?"

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Since Mr. Murrinkle, in asking him to tea, had said he wanted to be told more, this question of John's seemed a reasonable one. Mr. Murrinkle, however, showed signs of considerable alarm at the possibility that someone else might be going to talk.

"No, no," he cried, waving a hand. "You rest. Sit back. I've got it. I know what you think. I want to tell you what I think."

The waiter had arrived with the tea, and with a manner between that of a conjuror and a high dignitary of the Church, set the tea-things before them.

"You pour out," said Mr. Murrinkle, dividing the labour of the occasion fairly. "And I'll talk."

John took up the tea-pot to obey, found the handle too hot, wrapped his handkerchief round it, held it in mid-air and looked at Mr. Murrinkle. The waiter looked pityingly on.

"Allow me, sir," he said, took the pot away from John, and poured out two cups of tea, with a dignity that was a reproof to both John and the tea-pot. His hand, like a disembodied member, floated through the air and daintily took up the sugar tongs. He asked the question with his head, eyes and firm lips. Mr. Murrinkle held up four fingers. The poised hand made four light swoops to the bowl and four delicate hovers above the steaming brew of China. The episcopal face made no comment, but looked enquiringly then at John.

"Two," said John. "If you please."

The two were conveyed and submerged with a graciousness that just permitted an acknowledgment of the courtesy of an equal. The ritual hand withdrew to the dark cliff of the body. Dissolution was about to take place, when Mr. Murrinkle spoke.

"Here," he said. "What about milk?"

Something in the way the milk jug was taken up, the slightest astonishment in the firm curve, struck Mr. Murrinkle.

"You don't mind us having milk?" he said.

"Mind, sir?" echoed the waiter, enquiring mutely of John as he spoke to Mr. Murrinkle. "Not at all, sir."

He replaced the jug as upon an aery cushion, but the voice of a protesting China echoed faintly as he withdrew.

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"I like milk in China tea, and that's all there is to it," said Mr. Murrinkle. He took a sip of the ruined beverage, put down his cup, and said, "Now then——." John darted in while there was yet time. "Just a minute," he said. "Tell me one thing. Are you going to talk as a convert, or is it that you want to tell me how wrong I am?"

"Do I look like a man who was going to do either?" asked Mr. Murrinkle. "Be patient. You won't be sorry—I can promise you this—you won't be sorry you came over here to listen to me."

John took up his cup and saucer and resigned himself to the will of Mr. Murrinkle.

"Carry on," he said. "My experience tells me you ought to be convert or converter."

"You have," said Mr. Murrinkle, "an Idea. That is what makes you a *rara avis*. Most people are remarkable for travelling from the cradle to the grave without anything happening inside their heads that you could call a Thought, much less an Idea. The simple fact that you have an Idea makes you worthy of a serious man's attention."

It was evident who was a serious man, and that he intended a compliment. "Not," went on Mr. Murrinkle, "that you can always say that. Some chaps get an idea that lands 'em—you know where. And I'm not so sure that every chap with an Idea isn't just a bit so-and-so."

In spite of the circumlocution, the you-know-wheres and the so-and-so's, John was a little stung.

"Have you an Idea, Mr.—er?"

"Murrinkle. I did tell you. Yes. I have many Ideas. I've got one about you. You see, when you thought the time had come to tell the Public about your Idea, you made a great mistake. You chose the Wrong Public."

"You," said John, "are telling me."

"You know it now," said Mr. Murrinkle. "You found it out in the most painful way. If you'd asked me, I could have put you right."

"But," said John, "an hour ago, I didn't know you."

Mr. Murrinkle pulled out a pocket wallet, and from it extracted

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a card, which he passed over the table. John took it and read the inscription. It was die-stamped in red. In one corner there was a quill pen in a large inkpot. Diagonally opposite was a red telephone. Between these designs appeared the words:

Jupiter Murrinkle.

Public Liaison.

Albermarle Street, London, W.I.

"What," asked John, "is a public liaison?"

Mr. Murrinkle pushed away his cup and saucer. "I will tell you. It's time you knew," he said. "I'm the channel between the few who have Ideas, and the many who haven't. It's no good having an Idea if it doesn't flow." He made his hand ripple through the air and then sent it to hold his left lapel. "What would you think of a man who had the best Idea for making Perfect Pork Pies, and who tried to sell them to a Home for Incurable Dyspeptics?"

"I shouldn't think anyone would be fool enough," replied John.

"Oh, yes, they would," said Mr. Murrinkle. "You tried it this afternoon. Now listen to me. I'll tell you how to get this idea over." He took the rippling lapel-holding hand and spread its fingers. With the other forefinger, he began to tell off the requirements of the Will to Peace Movement.

"First," he said, "you want a good strong name for your Idea."

John told him what it was.

"Well, then, second, you want an office, if possible, bang in the West End."

"It's there. Four Stinton Street."

Mr. Murrinkle lowered his hands and stared at John.

"Then what the blazes were you doing in the Park this afternoon? You're like a farmer who locks his plough up and goes out to do the job with his false teeth. That stuff in the Park won't get you anywhere. I thought at first that you were just another of the Twisters and Twirps who entertain the Strolling Nitwits of London every Sunday. I'd no idea you had an Organization. All you've got to do is to catch the Right Public, and for that I'm your man. By Jove, the thing'll go like a house on fire. Look here—Four Stinton

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Street—I'll call to-morrow morning and we'll get down to it. You'll be in?"

"Yes," said John. "I'll be in."

He smiled at the enthusiasm of the Public Liaison.

"I can carry this right through with you," continued Mr. Murrinkle, making a note in his diary. "I'll bring you success. You'll be astonished. I don't want to boast, but I've had some amazing triumphs. You trust me and I'll put your Idea on the Map."

II

Mr. Jupiter Murrinkle was as good as his word. On the stroke of half-past ten, he entered John's office, looking, in his black coat and vest and striped trousers, more like a stork than ever—but this morning a professional stork. He walked with his stiff stride over to the big desk. Under his arm he had a large bundle of periodicals. He put them down on the desk, gave John a brisk good morning, sat down in the chair reserved for visitors, and taking off his spectacles, polished them with care. Peering at John with short-sighted eyes, he nodded at the pile of journals.

"Take a look at them," he said.

John turned them over, glancing at them here and there. Their very titles were challenges, and gleamed up at John fleetingly as he glanced through the pile. Such titles as *The Dawn*, *Star of Hope*, *Greatest Of These*, *Critic Of Critics*, *Gentle Reader*, *Help*, *The Leisure Hour* and the like, glowed for a moment on the vision and gave place to a title even more radiant. It was clear that these periodicals catered for readers with a dual need—a longing for culture, and a taste for a higher life. Among them, they must have represented thousands of readers who, when they had cast a prim and rather suspicious glance at the daily paper, turned with a happy confidence to the weekly which for them pierced the dirty fogs of diplomacy, the cloudy impropriety of politics, the deceptions and generally low proceedings of the world's leaders; and for them showed, with a merciless glare of white thought, the stupidity, animalism, and general inferiority of the Ordinary Human Being.

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In the columns of some of these journals, the difficult in art and literature were made easy. The inscrutable was deftly unscrewed, and the tough indigestible joints of letters were minced up for readers whose teeth, palates and digestion were unprepared for hard eating. On the other hand, there were others of these weeklies whose aim appeared to be to make every article totally incomprehensible, on the ground that what cannot be understood (being out of the grasp of the vulgar) must be of the finest quality.

The readers seemed to fall into two classes—those who were delighted because their chosen weekly enabled them to understand literature from Chaucer to Joyce; and those, on the contrary, who rejoiced at the conclusive proof offered by their review that nobody, not even the authors themselves, understood it. The first group evidently believed that culture only required a modicum of boost and simple elucidation to do everyone a bit of good, like a well-advertised tonic. The second party equally clearly thought that culture was, like a face-pack, a little muddy, even a little disagreeable, and, of course, quite opaque; but you put it on as directed, and it did you good in the night, making you, in subtle magic ways, different from the rest.

All this was vaguely apparent to John as he turned those aspiring pages. But there was one feature of them all that struck him at once. It was manifest that no cause—we do not say good cause—cried in vain to this multitude of readers. Missions, charities, societies, links, chains, golden circles, unfortunates, uplifters—all these raised voices solemn, familiar, naive, passionate, asking the reader to help, join, abstain, sign, but above all—and this united them—to send a trifle for, at any rate, necessary administrative expenses.

What a firmament, an enchantment of rainbow aspirations, of rosy hope the advertisements represented. It appeared that for a shilling here, half a crown there, one could banish misery from half the cities of the world, feed millions of the hungry, set decrepit sailors playing chess and draughts in front of roaring fires in all the ports of Europe, join the young people of all the world into a laughing friendly band all offering one another sweets and kisses in a common language, clap the naked into clean shirts or warm

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trousers, establish schools in the bush and clubs in the moral wilderness, close haunts of vice at least one day in seven, and—in short—remodel the world nearer to someone's heart's desire all by signing a form and enclosing P.O. for one silver coin.

Mr. Murrinkle had long put on his now shining spectacles and was whistling quietly. John turned over the last journal and replaced it on the pile. He looked at Jupiter. Jupiter returned his gaze.

"Well?" said he.

"I'd no idea that these periodicals existed," said John.

"No. That's why I found you wasting your breath in Hyde Park. And that's why you need a Public Liaison."

"What do you suggest?"

"That you advertise, through me, in all these——" Mr. Murrinkle slapped the pile with a familiar hand.

"But I can't say all my say in a short advertisement—people wouldn't just join and pay a five-shilling subscription because I asked them to."

"No?" said Mr. Murrinkle, scornfully. "That shows how much you don't know about it. Listen to me, my friend. It is an ascertained fact, established by experiment, that you can put an advertisement in a paper—spell it wrongly, lay it out badly, do everything you shouldn't with it, and you'll get a certain response. There are people about who would answer an advertisement and send the money for an evening tour round Wapping on a magic carpet. Hope is the life-blood of the sucker. Life isn't good enough for him. He wants better. So he replies to anything—*anything!*"

"Now look here," said John. "Let's get something straight before we go any farther. I am in dead earnest about the Idea. That's the first thing."

The stork nodded its head. "Granted. Granted. And the next thing?"

"I don't want suckers as members. I want men and women of real intellectual power, real integrity, and real determination."

Jupiter sat back, folded his hands and looked complacently at John. "In that case," he said, "I suggest you pass me an application form and call it a day. I'm the only man I know that answers your description, and there aren't any women like it."

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"Poh!" cried John contemptuously, "I've never heard such cynical rot in all my life."

The stork rose, put its hands in its pockets and stalked to the window, talking at John without turning round to look at him.

"There may be some. I said I didn't know 'em. But if there are, you can bet they don't take these papers."

"Then what's your idea in proposing to help with the Movement?" demanded John. Jupiter turned slowly round.

"I'll tell you that, if you haven't thought it out for yourself. The first point is that like the plumber and the doctor, I have to make my living. I have the same affection for Ideas as they have for burst pipes and rocky insides. The second is that if we wait to save the world from war till the world's full of the sort of people you described, the suckers will have blown it up before we can do anything to stop them. You've got to save the world with suckers 'cos that's all there is. Can't you see that? You saw it in the Park all right yesterday afternoon."

Jupiter grinned as he recalled John's burning words. "And didn't they love it."

"And what do you think of the Idea yourself?" asked John. "Not being a sucker."

Jupiter looked at John in a very superior manner. "It's lousy," he said. "We might as well be clear about that, too. But it has one great overwhelming advantage."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you," said John. "And what may that be?"

"It's so simple they'll be able to understand it. If they had any brains, you'd have been centuries too late to save 'em. They'd all have been saved ages ago. It's not want of Good Ideas the world suffers from, my boy, because you only require one to do the trick. It's want of brains to understand when we do get one. Now are we all square? I'll back your idea. I'll see that thousands hear of it—thousands of the Right Public—not a mixed gang of hilarious apes like you chose for yourself—and I'll guarantee a big membership in no time."

John pulled down his waistcoat, and brushed a thread off his sleeve.

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"This is a world idea, you know," he said, squinting at Jupiter as a shaft of sunlight coming through the window caught his eye.

The stork now came and perched on John's desk and looked very earnestly at him.

"You said yesterday," he remarked, "that you did not know what a Public Liaison was. I believe you. Fully. I had already grasped the fact that your Idea is world-wide. I had already thought out all the implications of that fact, and even made a provisional plan of campaign. But there are three Publics in this country which must be tackled in the following order. First, there is the Benevolent if Brainless Public, those to whom an Idea is meat and drink, especially if they can understand it without getting a headache. Second, there is the Numerical Public—those who are impressed when you tell them that an article has a million users, or a society a million members. They have the sort of brain that thinks a thing must be all right if enough people think so too. The first public is the bait of the second. The third is the *Not Me* Public. They think that nothing can get them, and that's how you get them. When we've dealt with them, we'll have a go at Japan or Ecuador if you like. But shall we—shall we have a little smack at England first?"

John laughed, and put out his hand. "Jupiter Murrinkle," he said, "get on with it. Get me the members, and I'll convert them."

Jupiter shook hands heartily. "And I'll do more for you than that," he said. "Remember that from this moment you are a prophet, a great man, a legend. Do exactly as I tell you, and you shall look like one. You know, I'm so pleased with all this, I'd very nearly become a member of your society myself."

"But, surely," said John, "that goes without saying. Of course you'll be a member."

Jupiter shook his head and smiled. "No," he said. "Better not. It's a poor doctor that starts by being a patient."

III

So the advertising was done by The Public Liaison; except for one very small, very insignificant advertisement which John inserted on his own initiative. Indeed, so small and insignificant was

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it, that you could not reasonably have expected anyone to read it, far less to respond to it. Yet it evoked a large—one might almost say an enthusiastic response.

Couched in a rare modesty of phrase, distinguished by a brevity almost repellantly curt, and printed in the smallest of type, it asked for a Secretary for John, sh. & typ. ess. state w. dsd.

Scores of women with excellent eyesight immediately wrote to John as touching his need for a Secretary. If the postman had had that kind of mind, he would have concluded that John was conducting his love affairs on Solomonic lines, for many of the letters looked deliciously feminine, though a few were severely business-like, showing that the writer was capable of typ., whether she could manage sh., or not.

It was something of a disappointment to open a blue envelope, faintly perfumed, and bearing John's name and address in an intimate-looking feminine hand, only to take out a letter that commenced 'Dear Sir.' But that is how—and who knows? perhaps they were right—that is how all these girls began their letters, as doubtless they had been instructed to do by soured Teachers in Commercial Schools. It is almost certain that a girl who opened her communication with something lighter, some expression that would have come as less of anti-climax, would have been called for interview, though whether, *ceteris paribus*, she would have been offered the post, who can tell so surely as those same Commercial Teachers?

They piled up, these offers of service, on John's desk, from addresses in Bayswater and Bloomsbury, Chingford and Cheam, Wimbledon and Walthamstow, Putney and Penge; from Mansions and Courts, Terraces and Avenues, Squares and Crescents. He became very interested in them, and wished he could have hired a hall in which to interview the applicants, every one. A cup of tea, perhaps, a fancy cake, and a light orchestra—but no; Mr. Drumme might not regard that as necessary administrative expenditure.

John turned the letters over. Many of the writers gave telephone numbers with a charming suggestion of the urgency of John's business; and it was only with difficulty—for he was sensitive to voices—that he refrained from ringing up the lucky possessors of

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telephones, to hear them speaking. It would have been possible to compile, from the things the writers deemed it desirable to say, a valuable little handbook, a *Vade Mecum* for the yet unborn, entitled "How Secretaries Picture Employers," with an Appendix, (a) "The Model Letter of Application," and (b) "The Coefficient of Susceptibility." Some of the writers gave John a sketch of their lives and circumstances that would have been a godsend to a novelist who hated thinking up details of that sort. Others mentioned ailing relatives in so genteel yet reproachful a manner that John felt he was indeed the custodian of the world's conscience, and personally responsible for every moment of the sufferings so discreetly hinted at in the letters. It was evident, from yet other of the letters, that the applicants read, if they did not actually write, those journals which Mr. Murrinkle brought for John's inspection; for nothing could exceed their sense of vocation in respect of the vacant post, or their certainty that it was for just this work that they had been sent into the world. But a few stern souls reminded John of his tiny advertisement, told him, rather coldly, that they had noticed it, and added that they could "attend for interview" between such-and-such hours on any week-day except Saturday, when they would prove to him their competence not only in typ. & sh., but also in all other ess. matters. And there was one letter, hastily though neatly written on a sheet of foolscap, and signed by a (Miss) Sonia Plenditt, which stated in full the writer's reasons for wishing to leave her present post. These included the facts that she was at present employed in a Tannery, that her boss had asthma and was obliged constantly to use a repulsive cure, and that change of job was good for one's experience—*bracket*—*Variety was the Spice of Life*—*bracket*. You could—John thought—almost hear this girl's chuckles ranging about amongst her sentences.

He therefore—with a sigh—put all the letters into a drawer save three. One of the three was Miss Sonia Plenditt's letter. The second was the neatest of the stern and brief epistles, from Miss Nesta Byre, who lived at Kingston. The last was the best of the autobiographies, and came from a lady called Anne Pickshore. It seemed she had enjoyed a very wide experience, having been born in Sumatra

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during an eclipse, and having held no less than seventeen posts in eleven years, posts that ranged from Secretary to the Headmaster of a Prep. School at Hove, to answering fan mail at a Film Studio.

To these three ladies John wrote, inviting them to call at Number Four Stinton Street. He timed them carefully, and gave Miss Pickshore priority. At her appointed hour, there came a tiny knock on the door, as if the door itself had modestly cleared its throat. John, seated at his desk in his best suit and most elegant tie, put his hand to the latter to straighten it, quite needlessly, smoothed his hair, moved a letter tray a fraction of an inch, and called out "Come In!"

The door opened slowly and with polite effort, as if it were of massy iron, and a small woman looked round it. John looked at her, and instantly felt like a well-groomed tom-cat seeing a mouse putting its head out of a hole in the skirting. The mousy visitor smiled nervously.

"Did you say Come In?" she asked in a voice five degrees above a whisper.

"Yes," replied John. "You're Miss Pickshore?"

"Yes," she admitted. "That's right."

"Come and sit down," said John.

"Oh, thank you," said Miss Pickshore. She turned completely round and closed the door with both hands, using one as a motor and the other as a brake, so that no unseemly bang should mar the perfection of first impressions. This achieved, she walked towards John, smiling resolutely at the floor, with steps that suggested tightropes and precipices. She sat down in the chair in front of John, not with an air of rude comfort, but uneasily, as if one could have passed a packet of cigarette papers (though none would have taken so great a liberty) between herself and the seat of the chair.

John looked at her, and she wriggled slightly. She had small dark eyes which seemed to be watering with fright, a rather red nose, and very small hands which she folded on her lap. She wore a hat which owed its shape to being put on her head. What it might have been before it had this chastening experience, it was impossible to imagine. The interview was, in effect, over. John cleared his throat and glanced at her letter which lay on the desk before him.

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"You've had a very varied experience," he remarked.

"Yes," said Miss Pickshore in her small voice, "I have rather."

"What makes you think you'd be successful in this kind of work?"

"Well, I don't really know what it is yet, do I? But I was Secretary to the Director of a Soup and Coal Charity——"

"Yes, I saw that."

"And I thought it might be something like that."

"A Benevolent Institution," said John, remembering Miss Drumme.

"Yes," said Miss Pickshore, nodding. "That's right."

Now Miss Pickshore was looking at John with so earnest a hope in her eyes, and John was looking at her with so fatal a resolve in his mind, that he was compelled to find out something that would justify the cruel necessity that would shortly have to be made plain to her.

"Why did you leave the Soap and Coal—I mean the——"

"Soup and Coal," corrected Miss Pickshore, laughing merrily but politely, and feeling that the informality of error and the companionship of laughter had practically got her in. Then she became serious again. "Well, you see, the price of Coal went up and the Director told me that the Committee had ordered him to make some economies in the office. So I had to go."

"Good lord," said John. "Couldn't he have cut the Coal Dole just for once?"

Miss Pickshore shook her head sadly. "No," she said. "You see, most of the beneficiaries were out-of-work stevedores."

John stared at Miss Pickshore and readily understood why the Director, faced with such a choice, made it Miss Pickshore.

John looked again at her letter. "Then I see you had a post as Secretary to the Manager of an Advertising Agency, but you only stayed two months."

"Yes. Then the Manager's niece fell out of work at Cardiff and he felt obliged for family reasons to do something for her."

"Mm," said John. "Smart girl, was she?"

"Yes," said Miss Pickshore. "She was really."

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"You have been unlucky. But what about the Prep. School at Hove? I should have thought you could have stopped there for life. They never get rid of anybody from a school, do they?"

"Well, you see," said Miss Pickshore, "that was most unfortunate. My youngest brother came to spend the day with me at the school. He wasn't feeling quite up to the mark, but I didn't think it was any more than a heat rash."

"And what was it?" asked John, with close interest.

"Measles," replied Miss Pickshore modestly.

"And it spread?"

"Like wildfire."

John sat back. "I see. I see. Well, it's very good of you to come, Miss Pickshore."

"Have I got the post?" she asked eagerly.

"I'll write. I have others I must interview. It's only fair."

"Oh, of course," said Miss Pickshore, but one could tell that she thought it was about time Someone or Something started being fair to Miss Pickshore. John rose. Miss Pickshore took up her gloves.

"If you decide to appoint me, when should I have to start work?" she asked.

"Immediately," replied John, gently hurrying her to the door.

Miss Pickshore smiled. "Oh," she said, "I could do that." It was her one qualification. She could start anywhere immediately. Her only disqualification was her inability to stay. John shook her hand with a heartiness that spoke of eternal farewell.

"Good-bye," he said, and added, "Good luck."

Miss Pickshore looked quite coyly at him. "Well, that's up to you," she said. "You're the Good Fairy in this case."

Even as that dart-like bird the crow flies it is a long way from the centre of Kingston-on-Thames to Stinton Street off Bond Street, but the entry to John's office of Miss Nesta Byre suggested that all life was a three-act play, and that she had stepped from the wings straight through John's door. She came in with a strong jaunty freshness, a swirl of Surrey air, a large breezy self-confidence that you would not have supposed could have survived even the

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shortest journey in an electric train, infested as they are with misanthropes and confirmed window-shutters.

"Are you Mr. John Klooner?" she asked in a voice which had cost her parents hundreds of pounds in good schools.

"Bang!" said the door.

"Do sit down," said John, cowering invisibly.

Miss Byre swung across the room and sat down with the sangfroid that this century regards as the right thing, and which the nineteenth would have privily paid money to see, looking round over its shoulder for the police all the time. She was a fine big girl who wore neither hat nor stockings. She made a one-turn spiral of her legs and looked piercingly at the prospective employer.

"Haven't I seen you before somewhere?" she asked.

John was inclined to suppose not.

"I'm sure I have, you know." She looked with a large dignity over the desk. "Weren't you at Merton with my brother—Canute Byre?"

John said that he lived at Blossomward.

"No, no," laughed Miss Byre. "I mean at Oxford."

John assured her that Canute had been obliged to sustain the heat and burden of the day at Merton without him.

"But you were up at Oxford," insisted Miss Byre, wrinkling her brow. "I'm sure I've met you there." So great a vocal swell was there on the word sure, that John regretted a thousand times that he had never even been to Oxford on a day trip. But when he had at last convinced Miss Byre that he was not just wantonly denying his University, there was that in her manner which made him feel that he ought to have washed his neck more carefully.

"Well, never mind," she said, putting her right toe more firmly round the outside of her left ankle—taking grip, as it were.

"Now—about this job. I gather you want something more than a shorthand typist—the sort of little girl who brings you tea and leaves out all your commas?"

At this little jest, she smiled like the hostess at a week-end party, and John worked his risible muscles in courteous response.

"As I said in the notice—I want a Secretary," he replied.

"Exactly," said Miss Byre. "And though one does so hate any-

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thing like snobbery, there's a great deal to be said for having a lady as one's assistant."

John felt that they were living—Miss Byre and he—in some rare atmosphere of understanding, elevated and urbane. There was only one catch about it—evidently Miss Byre felt that she was carrying him with her, and that all that remained was to settle the details.

"What are you paying?" she asked, with that directness about money possible only to the very refined and the very vulgar.

John replied that the salary was not yet fixed, but that he had a certain latitude, having regard to the qualifications of the person appointed.

"I see," said Miss Byre with understandable satisfaction. "Well, as I did just mention in my letter, I've had a great deal of experience in Social Work—really responsible experience—and as for the mechanical side, you can leave that to me. I think you'll find that my typing and shorthand will meet any need of ours." Of ours. The point was, how could a chap who had not been to Merton with Miss Byre's brother or anybody else get a lady out of the room without being guilty of bad form? This problem was occupying the back of John's mind, when a smart chic little knock came at the door, a knock that sounded as if it had been to Paris in its time, and knew how to choose a costume and wear a pair of silk stockings with anyone in Europe. Miss Byre uncoiled her legs.

"I'll deal with it," she said. "Don't you bother."

She rose and went towards the door as if it were the gate of a hockey field. She swung it open, and there stood Miss Sonia Plenditt. It was not a case of friendship at first sight. Miss Byre looked at Miss Plenditt as if she were a maid who had spilt something on the drawing-room carpet—something really objectionable. Miss Plenditt responded by looking Miss Byre up and down, and as there was plenty of Miss Byre, it took a fair time.

"Yes?" said Miss Byre sharply. "Can I help you?"

"I have," replied Miss Plenditt in a prettily grim tone, "an appointment with Mr. Klooner."

"What is your name?" asked Miss Byre.

Miss Plenditt told her, grudgingly. Miss Byre turned to John and

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announced it, grudgingly also, like an echo with feelings of its own, but a better education.

"Oh, yes," said John. "I was expecting Miss Plenditt."

Competently, with a terrifying air of being on the staff, Miss Byre let Miss Plenditt in, waited a moment for a lead, and then said that she would wait in the other room, should she? John thanked her, and she vanished into the wings. John looked at Miss Plenditt and appointed her at once. She sat down, and John observed how good she made the chair look.

"Is that lady on your staff?" asked Miss Plenditt.

John was making a list of Miss Plenditt's qualifications.

The voice received ten out of ten.

"No," he replied. "She's one of the applicants for the job you're after."

Miss Plenditt let out a chuckle, and John grinned. They looked at one another for a moment, and the case of Miss Byre was fully understood.

"Dark hair and eyes," said John, entering the details on that inner list of qualifications. "She's just the right shape. Square shoulders and exquisite legs. And I love that red dress."

Miss Plenditt waited for the conversation to begin, looking at John with bright eyes, eager and amused.

"We'd better," she said, "get on with the interview."

"Certainly," replied John. "What do we do now?"

Miss Plenditt produced a notebook and pencil from her bag.

"You might test my shorthand, and I can read back to you."

"All right," said John, and sitting back he dictated a few words, looking out of the window as he did so. Then he looked at Miss Plenditt. She read the dictation back with slow enjoyment.

"The lady who let you in," she read, "may be—indeed, I think is, a very competent person. She evidently believes that she has appointed herself, and I am thoroughly frightened about it."

"Absolutely correct," said John solemnly. "You're very good."

"Have I got the job?" asked Miss Plenditt.

"It's yours," replied John. Miss Plenditt rose to move into the wings.

"Then leave the lady to me," she said grimly.

Part Two

THE RESULT

CHAPTER ONE

I

THERE was a week in which the countless readers of those high-minded journals received a new ringing challenge. Through innumerable charitable and cultured doors, the weekly uplift was thrust by an untidy boy from the newsagent's shop, and opened by hands accustomed to turn over without a start their sober pages.

Into many a shadowy bookseller's shop in many an ancient High Street stepped the regular readers to collect their weekly offset against the wicked and ignorant world. With an ear more sensitive than the most delicate apparatus of detection, we hear the rustle of pages in a thousand homes suddenly stop, and the sound of ten thousand feet in all the High Streets suddenly halt. What has cried *stop* but the voice of John Klooner, even though it speak in the accents of Jupiter Murrinkle. For there upon those gentle pages, staring out from among the decrepit sailors, the untrousered savages, the unschooled children, like the fierce visage of a majestic tiger penned in the same cage as a company of purring puss-cats, threatening to burst the prisoning bars, and to claw the very horizons that confine it, was the thundering challenge that emerged from Stinton Street via the Public Liaison in Albemarle Street.

It cried Terror, War and All Hideousness. It spoke Conditional Hope. It commanded the Right-minded to apply forthwith for the Free Booklet entitled *It Need Not Be or The Plan for Safety*. It gave, that Primal Voice among the Foolish Urbanities, the address from which hope came, of the very caverns where dwelt the comfort

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and safety of the human race, of the echoing hills whence would blush the dawn of a new and better era—to wit, Number Four Stinton Street, off Bond Street, London West One.

As if the message of this new Spirit were not in itself tremendous enough, the words in which it came disdained the sober dress of the type in which the Links, Chains, Circles, Societies and Associations spoke their habitual appeal, and like giants in the shallow valleys of those quiet pages, they strode in the mantle of new and flowing founts, so that although they were robed in black and white like their pigmy brethren of reform, they glowed and flashed as if indeed they had been decked in the colours of a verbal rainbow. Thus did the Idea, attired in brilliance, ringing with the tones of an urgency like a forest fire, humming and flashing, deeply roaring and lividly burning, smite the perception of all those gentle readers, lineal descendants of the mighty and comfortable dead whom the novelist of yesterday was wont to address in those self-same words—gentle reader—and who can picture or hope to catalogue that great company; the curate, the dressmaker, the florist, the teacher, the poultry-farmer, the soldier's widow, the smallholder, the typist, the switchboard attendant, the shop-girl, the philosophic glass-blower, the reflective bank-clerk, the messenger, the signalman's wife, the cashier at the cinema, the museum custodian, the dispenser, the spinster, the builder's clerk—a host whose name and number none can yet tell, but who shall find, each and every one, a place of honour on that roll yet to be kept, with a scrupulous if ironical neatness by Miss Sonia Plenditt at the Head Office of the Will to Peace Movement.

The same power that throbbed in the advertisements of Mr. Jupiter Murrinkle animated the booklet, and thrilled in its every word, those words set up in an exquisite type on a beautiful paper—that booklet which was a magnification of the advertisements, the apotheosis of the challenge in the journals, the incarnation of the Idea. As the advertisements were giants in their kind, they of the thundering voice and rainbow appeal, the booklet was a Gargantuan of Speech, towering above the advertisements as they above their fellows. With a livid truthfulness, a low growl of Terror to Come,

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it began by setting out the most terrifying prophecies about the coming war, all taken straight from the pages of the novelists who desired to say 'We told you so.' Then John and Mr. Murrinkle laid their own imaginations under contribution, and far from underlining the gloomy words of the authors, o'ertopped the same, as an angry baker might desperately and savagely ice a cake for an enemy.

And then came the Idea, printed in red ink, in passages of a tranquillizing yet stimulating prose which told how all this evil might yet be brought to nought. The cogency with which John once spoke to Mr. Trumper and Joe Gearie at the Barrow Cuisine, the passion he applied to the conversion of Mr. Grindrod, the black rage with which he dealt with Mr. Dammering and Mr. Shroud, and the sweet reasonableness and amiability that characterized his statement to Old Mr. Drumme—all these helped John to compose what must be regarded as one of the most powerful, most touching and most elegant arguments that ever went out to an unknown but susceptible public. It was evidently not an essay whose rolling periods and majestic injunctions could be marred by a reference to a sum so common, and indeed in such constantly humorous employment as five bob. It was reserved for the back cover, therefore, to speak of such a pedestrian matter. Like a little local tradesman saying a word after a mighty orator, it stepped forward at the end (which was after all inevitable for a back cover) and quietly and prosaically explained that there were certain expenses in connection with saving the world, and that the simplest way of covering these was to levy upon each enrolled member of the new Movement a subscription of five shillings, which might be remitted to the Head Office (repeated for the convenience of all—Number Four Stinton Street off Bond Street, London West One) in the shape of a crossed cheque or, preferably, a postal order.

Mr. Murrinkle's first order was for ten thousand copies of the booklet. John was alarmed, for his conceptions of number were, like most people's, individual in source and nature. The man in the train who talks easily of wars that cost twenty million pounds a day, the teacher who airily mentions to an astonished class that the sun is ninety-three millions of miles away from the earth (which is, by

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the way, when all else fails, an occasion for some small gratitude) do not believe themselves even as they speak. They are much more impressed to hear of a man who can eat a dozen eggs for his tea, and much more annoyed to learn that tobacco has gone up five-pence. Everybody—even every schoolboy in these illiterate times—knows that the population of this country is some forty odd millions of people. But nobody believes it. Neither did John. When it was proved that there were printers with enough ink, paper, and resolve to turn out pile upon shining pile of the booklet, he looked at the arriving parcels with despair, thought dreadfully upon Mr. Drumme and the bill, and believed that he was saddled for life with the largest quantity of first-class paper he had ever had the misfortune to see. The great thing about an Idea, however wide its span and sweep, is that it takes up no room, gathers no dust, and above all, costs nobody anything. You cannot say as much for the results of Ideas. But when, as the result of feverish activity by himself, Miss Plenditt, Mr. Murrinkle and a lad borrowed from the printer, all but seven of the booklet had gone out in thirteen days, his ideas of number had undergone a revolution. In the files of Miss Plenditt lay thousands of letters asking for the booklet. Some of their writers, unable to control the impulse to part with five shillings, or not being clear that you received the booklet without charge or commitment, had enclosed P.O. as so quietly mentioned by that stalwart of the Movement, the back page; for the advertisements had decently hinted the matter of necessary expense as well. There were even headlong persons who had sent a pound note with their letter, thus putting the office into the difficult position of not knowing whether to send the change, give them a season ticket to the projected meetings of the Movement, or create a special branch for quadruple, or even—for you never could tell—multiple membership, offering four (or many) votes, chairs and copies of literature as published.

It was late afternoon of the day when the last but seven of the booklets had been packed, addressed and made ready. Miss Plenditt had gone to the Post Office with the last consignment. The printer's boy had gone off for a nice cup of tea. Mr. Murrinkle, his coat

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off and his hands on his hips, surveyed John with shiny satisfaction.

"I rang Chubby up this morning and ordered a hundred thousand extra copies of the booklet," he said. Chubby was the long thin lugubrious printer who prided himself on looking like R. L. S.

"Good," said John calmly, putting on his coat. "Is that going to be enough?" It is extraordinary how soon one becomes used to real astronomical thinking.

"You're getting on," said Mr. Murrinkle with a grin. "You seemed to think twenty-five would be enough on the last order—one for each of your pals and five for Old Drumme, as he was doing the paying."

"I was only being cautious," said John.

"You were an' all," replied Mr. Murrinkle.

"Well, now it's proved that we need the numbers," said John.

"Yes. And what would you have done if I hadn't insisted on a big order?"

"That's your job."

"Blimey," said Mr. Murrinkle. "Well, I'm not used to gratitude, so I don't miss it. Now, there's one or two points I have in mind, Chief."

Mr. Murrinkle always addressed John as Chief. Something inside John always rose up with pleasure to receive this so well-merited title.

"Shoot," said the Chief thing inside John.

"Ah," said Mr. Murrinkle, well aware of this mechanism whose flattering button he had just pressed. "Well, about this forming of Branches in the country, and setting up of a Peace Centre in every place of any size."

"That's the next job," said John. "I've dictated a letter to members already, so that can go to the printers any time."

"Yes. Well, that's going to take you about a good bit. You'll have to visit these places. You'll want a car."

"Yes. I've been thinking about that myself," said John. "A nice little——"

"A nice little nothing," said Mr. Murrinkle. "You leave this side of the business to me. You've got to have a car, my boy, that looks

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like the chariot of a prophet, a car that tells everyone the Great Man is in the vicinity, even if he's gone in to have one. I've seen just the job for you this morning." Mr. Murrinkle's eyes lit up with the glow of pure poetry. His hands moved in mystic curves through the air. "A long swift job—a job like a red eagle. It's a car for a conqueror. In it, a man could swoop on his destination like a burning comet. You wouldn't see another like it in a long day's driving. . . . It's the car for you."

"That's fine," said John. "Fine. But who's going to pay for it?"

Mr. Murrinkle passed his hand over his mouth and chin. He looked out of the window. "The members," he replied, "would love you to have that bus. It would give them the right feeling about the organization."

"I daresay it would," said John. "But they're not going to pay for it."

Mr. Murrinkle looked at John—a solemn stork. "Do you know how much ten thousand five bobs amount to, or were you better at English composition?"

"Necessary administrative expenses?" asked John.

"You've got it," said Jupiter. "In that car, my dear Chief, you'd look a man of mark wherever you went, which brings me to my second point."

"Let's have it," said Chief.

"Ah," said Mr. Murrinkle. "Well—I don't like your clothes."

The Chief hated that. There was no waiting for second thoughts.

"If it comes to that," said John, with a stormy look at the Public Liaison, "I don't like yours—no, I'm damned if I do."

"All right, Chief, all right," said Mr. Murrinkle soothingly. "You can tell me later. Meanwhile, listen to a bit of Psychology—i.e., Common Sense—without getting blood pressure. A great man can do one of two things about dress. He can either have the best and look as if he had it, or he can be so shabby that everyone says it must be him. You dress between these excellent extremes." A look of great contempt came on Jupiter's face. "So do most people," he continued. "Their clothes are as good as a warm hole to hide in—that's all. And when you were doing your clerking job, nothing

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could have been better. Now you're a Prophet and a Leader, you've got to make up your mind. Which is it going to be—the World's Greatest Tatterdemalion or the Immaculate High Priest? Do, for the Lord's sake, remember the Gossip Writers. They don't know how to describe a clerk, because a clerk won't give 'em a break."

Telling the truth to Great Men, even if you are in process of making them yourself, is a dangerous sport. The stork looked as if a blunderbuss might suddenly be snatched out of the desk. But the Chief was thoughtful. There was, he reflected, a good deal in what the Public Liaison said; besides, if it was his duty to the Movement to wear good clothes—really good clothes—it must be done; and it would be hard to regard the duty as repulsive. The Chief's brow cleared. The blunderbuss stayed where it was. He looked firmly at Mr. Murrinkle as he enunciated his sartorial policy.

"If I," he said, "were the Viceroy of India and Mr. Rothschild rolled into one, I wouldn't wear ragged trousers or a greasy coat."

Mr. Murrinkle produced a little card from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to John, who read its inscription and put it carefully in his pocket wallet.

"That man," said Mr. Murrinkle solemnly, "is the best tailor in Europe, and as you see, he has his place of business only four minutes walk away from this office. Call there. He knows what to do."

Something in the imperiousness of the last few words called Chief up from beneath the pleasant speculations about what the best tailor in Europe could do for one. John frowned.

"And if I don't?" he asked.

Mr. Murrinkle recognized that it was Chief who asked that question, but resolved on the courage of the truth. For a moment, the tiger looked out of the eyes of the stork, but strangely enough, this extraordinary marriage of expression was not laughable.

"By Gosh," he said fiercely, "I'll have you photographed by the Press as you are—the great Leader disguised as one of the members from Upper Tooting."

John grinned the Chief down to his lair. "I only wondered," he said.

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"That's all right, then," said Mr. Murrinkle less fiercely. "There's no harm in wondering."

II

It is one thing to criticize an Idea when it lives in the mind of a friend, humble and powerless; it is quite another thing to be confronted with rich proof that there seems to be more in the Idea than one had at first the wit to discern. With something of this in his mind, and a very reflective look in his blue eyes, Joe Gearie spoke to his colleagues, Mr. Trumper and Mr. Slogrund one day when things were quiet in the office of Village Estates Building Society—Mr. Trebbe being out for a few minutes.

"It looks," he said, with a piercing and rather reproachful glance at his companions, "as if there was something in this Idea of John's."

"I always thought there was," said Mr. Trumper, who was taking the opportunity of cleaning his pipe, an operation that lay somewhere between the Annual Spring Clean at an Outfall Works, and scraping the bottom of a large ship after many weary voyages.

"What is there in it?" asked Mr. Slogrund, with more scorn than could really be afforded by a man who only took sixes in hats.

Joe folded his arms and looked contemptuously at Mr. Slogrund. "There's a large office in it, my friend," he said, speaking like a particularly resolute Montessori teacher to a backward infant. "And there's a big fast red car in it—a car that can do ninety on the flat. And I'll tell you what there is not in it, too, if you like. There isn't Mr. Trebbe in it." Breathing deeply through his nose, Joe sat back and surveyed the backward infant. Mr. Trumper blew thoughtfully through the detached stem of his pipe, and a moist brown missile sped through the air in Joe's direction.

"You dirty hound," cried Joe, evading the shot and looking with the deepest blue disgust at his friend.

"I was going to remark—begging your pardon, Joe——" said Mr. Trumper, "that we ought, for old times' sake, to go round and see old John. He's a great feller, and it 'ud be a shame to drop him."

"Drop him?" said Joe, half closing his eyes. "You've got your elevations wrong, haven't you?"

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Mr. Trumper ignored this point and laid his hand on the telephone.

"Let's ring him up now," he suggested, putting the nice clean outfall works in his pocket.

"Good idea," agreed Joe. "Do it quick, before Trebbe gets back."

Miss Plenditt answered the call with her hundred per cent. voice.

Was Mr. Klooner in?

Not at the moment. Could she do anything?

Perhaps she could say when he would be in.

That was difficult. Would Mr. Trumper care to make an appointment? He clapped his hand over the mouthpiece, and spoke to his companions. "You have to make an appointment to see him now," he said.

"Blimey," said Mr. Slogrund.

"Well," said Joe with urgent realism, "make an appointment then. I want to see him, and the inside of his joint. I've heard it's the most smashing office in the West End."

Noon to-morrow?

Miss Plenditt would book it.

"Then I shan't be able to come," protested Mr. Slogrund.

"So what?" demanded Joe, and Mr. Slogrund could think of no reply.

The sweet red car stood at the entrance to Number Four Stinton Street when Mr. Trumper and Joe Gearie arrived. Joe passed a loving, indeed a covetous hand over its beautiful lines.

"Cor dam," he said, and Mr. Trumper required no explanation. In a few moments they were ushered into John's presence by a Miss Plenditt so adorable that it was a marvel she was ever able to usher anybody out on her own. John sat at his desk and waved them to chairs. They sat and gazed at their old colleague. This was not the John who used to be late for work, and think up astounding reasons for Mr. Gassdrop's wit to demolish; not the John who used to pay his cheerful shilling for his cheerless square meal; not the John who conferred in Gents' Lavatories. It was he who owned and drove the

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sweet red car, he who wore the best art of the best tailor in Europe, he who ate and drank at the Savoy Grill—or at the Café Royal if he were in a hurry, he whose sauce was success, and whose thought was a saving message, inspired and authoritative; in a word, Mr. Murrinkle's Chief, the Leader of a great following.

"Well, lads," said John. "How's everything going?"

"To tell you the truth," said Mr. Trumper, "it just stays. As it always did. Except that I don't think Trebbe takes anything that doesn't belong to him."

"No," said Joe. "But he takes far too much of what does—overtime every other night. But don't let's talk about that, John. You can't be interested, and we certainly ain't."

Joe's eyes were making a Grand Tour of the room. They rested for a while on John's desk, its design stolen from craftsmen of the eighteenth century; and from there, like two blue butterflies, they travelled slowly across the rich carpet, played along bookcases full of books with heavenly bindings of leather, all done by the sweet hands of craftsmen, dwelt lovingly on little treasures like a silver calendar, an ash-tray gleaming with silver and blue enamel, diary, address book and telephone number book bound so that they would be riches for ever, long after their usefulness had vanished, strayed to choice prints on the walls, and then travelled through the opulent air to John's face. His hand went to his pocket, and came out with two half-crowns which he laid on the desk in front of John, where they doubled their silver depth in the gleaming surface of the wood.

"Some little debt you thought I'd forgotten?" asked John.

"No," replied Joe. "The fee. It's five shillings, isn't it? I want to be a member. That's partly what I came for."

"But I remember that you think nothing of the Idea," said John in astonishment. "Don't join just to please me, Joe. We want members who believe in the thing."

"I'm not joining to please you," said Joe, folding his arms, and looking closely at John. "You've got something here, and I want to be with you."

"Now look here, Joe," said John. "This is awfully sweet of you,

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but I must remind you that you said this thing was not an Idea, but a joke."

Joe leaned towards the desk and took up the delicious little address book, bound as if for a king. He played with it as if to muster his thought.

"I may have done," he said, his thumb passing to and fro over the patrician leather. "But only to draw you out."

"I see," said John. "That was what it was."

Joe put down the little book and clasped his hands. He looked very severely at John. "I hope you're not guilty of bearing animosity on account of a thing like that, John," he said.

"Not at all," replied John. "I was only a little astonished because I didn't know you'd changed your view."

Joe rose and strolled over to the mantelpiece to examine a very handsome silver cigarette box. He picked it up and weighted it in his hand.

"Do have one," said John.

Joe shook his head. "I still don't smoke. I haven't changed my mind about that either. I was thinking about that ass Slogrund. He's never seen the value of your Idea. Only yesterday he was asking us what there was in it. You couldn't have dealt better with it if you'd been there yourself."

Joe put down the cigarette box and went to the window, where, looking out, he caught sight of the red car waiting below like a rosy angel poised for flight. He turned to the room again and put his hands behind him. "I told him what there was in it—I told him that to mock at great ideas is to inherit the jungle. Here's this Idea of yours——"

John picked up Joe's five shillings and put it in his pocket.

"Joe," he said, "say no more. I'm convinced. I'll get Miss Plenditt to send you a receipt."

Mr. Trumper leaned forward. "The name again?" he said.

"Plenditt—Miss Sonia Plenditt," replied John.

"I thought you said Miss," said Mr. Trumper. "Any attachments that you know of, John?"

"None at the moment, I believe," said John.

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"And you're not—er—thinking of——?"

"Much too busy," said John.

Mr. Trumper put a slow hand in his pocket and produced five shillings, which he placed before John.

"Get her to send me a receipt too, will you?" he asked.

III

It has been said that John soon gave up the practice of reading the letters that came in with the applications for membership. Thus it was that he missed the extraordinary sensation he would undoubtedly have had at seeing a letter from no other than Mr. Gassdrop, asking for the booklet. The letter was written in a personal strain, beginning *My Dear Klooner*, but Miss Plenditt saw nothing about the communication to make her vary her practice of stamping the mail and filing it when dealt with. It did not strike her as odd—for she had never known Mr. Gassdrop—that such a change had come over his outlook. It appeared that he had been thinking very much about the old days and was delighted to learn of John's great success in a department of much-needed reform, one that was particularly near to Mr. Gassdrop's heart and in accord with his most fervent hopes for the race. He had great pleasure, therefore, in applying for the booklet, which he was sure was a brilliant exposition—that was Mr. Gassdrop's word—and worthy of the best that he recalled of John in the old days. In conclusion, he wished the Leader of this great and humane movement all success. Unfortunately, John saw none of this, and was consequently unprepared to see a so greatly reformed Mr. Gassdrop when Miss Plenditt announced him one morning as a conference with Mr. Murrinkle was just drawing to a close.

"Did you say Gassdrop?" said John to Miss Plenditt as she stood framed like a picture at the door.

"Yes," replied Miss Plenditt. "I think I got the name right. Does it sound familiar—and do you want to see him?"

"It sounds familiar," replied John, and fell into a meaty little reverie.

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"Well," said Mr. Murrinkle, "I'll be going while you think whether you want to see this bloke or not."

The Chief shot out a hand and seized Mr. Murrinkle's sleeve.

"No," he said. "Don't go. I think you'll like this chap, unless he's lost some of his endearing ways."

"Right," said Mr. Murrinkle, and sat down again.

"Send him in?" asked Miss Plenditt.

"Right away," said John. "I can't wait."

Miss Plenditt withdrew, and in a moment the well-known figure of Mr. Gassdrop appeared, tall, straight and commanding. As he caught sight of John, a charming smile came on his face, and he held out a hand.

"It's very good of you to see an old friend, Klooner," he said heartily, glancing at Mr. Murrinkle at the same time. "Very good, for I hear that you're a very busy man these days. How are you? You're looking awfully well, in spite of having so much to do."

"Sit down," said John, looking with sympathy at Mr. Gassdrop, for it was clear that the ravages of the complaint which had evoked Mr. Carver's concern were considerable, and the neighbour air changed constituency slightly as they shook hands, bearing testimony to the painful fact that Mr. Gassdrop was taking the medicine as before. "This is Mr. Murrinkle—Mr. Gassdrop."

"How d'ye do?" murmured Jupiter.

"Good morning," replied Mr. Gassdrop, looking at the Public Liaison as if he were forty minutes late for work. It appeared that the former manager regretted the presence of Mr. Murrinkle. However, he made the best of what he clearly regarded as one of the worst jobs he had ever run into, being unable in the circumstances to point an angry arm at the door and cry "*Out!*" with any hope of the inhospitable instruction being obeyed.

John pushed over the silver box of cigarettes. "Do have a smoke," he said. Association of ideas is a fine thing. However, Mr. Gassdrop graciously accepted a cigarette and lit it. John looked at him and awaited the announcement of the business that had brought about the visit.

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"You got my letter," said Mr. Gassdrop. "Well, of course, I know you did, for you sent me the booklet."

"Yes, of course," replied John, looking at Mr. Gassdrop without winking.

"I didn't expect a reply," went on Mr. Gassdrop, "for I quite understand you can't reply personally to every letter, but I wanted you to know how I felt about the Movement and that you had the support of an old friend."

Mr. Murrinkle gazed at the floor and made a few reflections about John's old friends, while John felt that he was having the rare experience of seeing an alligator holding a prayer-book. All that remained was to find out why.

"I ought to know these things," said John. "But do you mean that you're a member now?"

"Well, practically," said Mr. Gassdrop. "In effect I am. It just happens that I haven't had a spare moment to send you the subscription—but you know how it is—one seems hardly to have time to breathe."

There was so much to think about in this remark that neither John nor Mr. Murrinkle made any reply, and when Mr. Gassdrop filled in the pause by a companionable laugh, they both thought deeply about the concluding words.

"I recognized the touch in the booklet," continued Mr. Gassdrop with the air of a schoolmaster talking to a very distinguished old boy—an air knowing, intimate and contributory. "I thought it was one of the finest things I'd read for a long time. Entirely your own product, I take it—well, of course—the old style on a new subject."

"I owe a little to our friend Mr. Murrinkle," admitted John. "He should have half the praise, if any is due, for the little book."

Of this generous remark, Mr. Gassdrop took not the slightest notice, but went on with the revelation of his appreciation without even a glance at the Public Liaison.

"You may think it strange, having worked with me for so long," he went on, "that it never came out in conversation that this problem was uppermost in my mind at the very time when you were thinking your way through it."

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John, recalling the strictly limited nature of his conversations with the former manager, murmured that he had not really thought it strange.

"Well, perhaps not," said Mr. Gassdrop. "We were always absorbed in the business, of course; but"—here he laughed in the manner of a man of the world with men of the world—"odd how things happen—I had arrived at the same conclusion as you."

Here the old fierce Mr. Gassdrop appeared; but only in manner, and on account of the strength of his conviction and the power of his rhetoric. He stubbed out his cigarette in the blue and silver ash-tray. "I saw quite clearly," he said, looking hard at John, "that the hope of averting the war lay in sufficient people thinking and talking on new lines. I remember lying in bed one night, tortured with anticipations of the coming war, and suddenly—suddenly—"

Mr. Gassdrop's voice boomed, his blue eyes widened, and he swept a long arm out towards the window. John was following him with so tense an interest that he forgot himself, and as the arm reached its zenith so to speak, he was carried away.

"Out!" he cried enthusiastically.

Mr. Gassdrop paused, retaining his bodily position as if he had spent some years in the dropping well at Knaresborough.

"I beg your pardon?" he said, holding the arm out still.

"Nothing, nothing," said John, recovering and turning slightly redder than was his usual. "Please go on. This is most interesting, isn't it, Jupiter?"

"Most," agreed Mr. Murrinkle, viewing Mr. Gassdrop like a householder looking at a total stranger fingering the gas-meter.

"Well," continued Mr. Gassdrop, his voice rising with the passion of his thought. "Suddenly I saw it all. If, I thought, all people everywhere, resolved never to think or speak of war again, surely—surely that would make it impossible."

"Exactly my point," said John.

"The identical article," said Mr. Murrinkle without astonishment.

Mr. Gassdrop's force sank, like an unneeded lamp flame. He spread his arms, he shrugged, he pouted whimsically. "And then," he said, "I found, to my mingled amazement and delight, that a

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man I had worked with had evolved the same idea—and, what was so much better, had gone forward with it.”

“Telepathy,” said Mr. Murrinkle. “A lot more research ought to be done on it.”

“Thought transference,” said John. “A clear case. How extraordinary you must have thought the whole matter.”

“Well, tell you the truth,” said Mr. Gassdrop, chuckling in a big-hearted way, “I did. But what matters is that one of us was able to get it on the market, if I may use such an expression.” He leaned forward towards John, who instinctively sat back an inch or two; he clenched his fist; he spoke in a low intense roar. “But it’s *got* to succeed,” he shouted. “It’s *got* to.”

Then there occurred another of those pauses. Mr. Murrinkle uncrossed his legs. “Well,” he said, in a three-minutes-to-the-last-curtain way. John glanced at his wrist-watch, drew a cautionary breath and glanced with a disarming smile at his visitor.

“It was good of you to call,” he said, and awaited the result of that.

“I know you’re busy,” said Mr. Gassdrop, “and I must go. But I’ve got a proposition to make that may interest you, if you can spare another minute.”

“Ah,” said the minds of John and Jupiter. “Here we go.”

The proposition was simple. Mr. Gassdrop was aware—he seemed to have made what is called a study of the habits of the household—that John was compelled to get about a good deal, and so to leave the office to its own methods. What could be more sensible than to appoint an Office Manager to run the inside of the job, leaving John free for the outside work; and that being accepted, who more suitable than an old colleague who by a miracle, had evolved the same Idea as John, and so was deeply in the Spirit of the Movement without any coaching such as would be required in the case of a stranger. Sentiment, of course, had nothing to do with business, but it was a fact—a hard fact—that Mr. Gassdrop had not picked up an appointment since he left Village Estates Building Society. When the answer to any proposal is a resounding negative, you may behave like Miss Doolittle, or you may invent a little act of

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your own. John chose the latter part. He gave—indeed he may be said to have sought to give—the impression of a pretty deliberation. One hand lightly held the other, and fingers played a little tune on a wrist. A piece of paper lay on the floor. John affected to catch sight of it and to be as concerned as if it had been a five-pound note or even a small bomb. He gave it one or two reproving glances, and seemed heavily preoccupied with the question of picking it up. Mr. Murrinkle sat, grim and silent. The curtain was due but not imminent. There were tiny furrows on Mr. Gassdrop's brow as the silence deepened. At length John decided, it seemed, to leave the paper where it was till later on. He looked at Mr. Gassdrop. His mouth opened and out came words that would not have been a disgrace to Miss Doolittle after all.

"Well," he said, "I will say this for you. You've got a bloody nerve."

Mr. Murrinkle started. To say that Mr. Gassdrop did so would be to mislead the reader. Most people have never seen a victim of the Electric Chair, and so it is useless to employ the comparison. Indeed, Mr. Gassdrop's reaction compels a search so wide among the resources of language that finally one must say the bankrupt thing about being better imagined than described. It was a reaction to bankrupt description. A sudden swelling, a rush of blood, a fierce murder-hungry yawning, a flash of blinding homicidal light, a cloud of medicine fumes, the roar of a shell-store going up, all these were in it. As once he nearly plunged across his own desk to bury his teeth in John's throat, so now he attempted to do it. He leaped up snarling, and shot clutching hands out at John. In a moment Mr. Murrinkle was on his feet, the stork rampant, and he and John seized what portions of Mr. Gassdrop were available. The desk received a push that sent it rumbling across the floor. The precious knick-knacks flew to the ground, making their tinkling contribution to the uproar. Dust and fluff arose and Mr. Murrinkle had a second in which to say "Sack the char," before he and John and Mr. Gassdrop were on the floor together.

Mr. Gassdrop may have been unwell, but he gave a considerable amount of trouble. They rolled and tumbled about the floor, gasp-

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ing and clutching, swearing and punching. In the middle of the uproar, John's private door that led straight into the corridor, was opened a few inches, and the face of a little old lady with a bonnet appeared. She must have been rather shortsighted, for she asked the question she had come to ask. "Is this," she quavered, "the Office of the Will to Peace Movement?"

Mr. Murrinkle gave her a fleeting glance before returning to the wordless conference on the floor. "Not at the moment, madam," he gasped. "Shut the door when you go."

She was a polite old lady as well as being myopic, for she closed the door quietly, as if unwilling to disturb anyone.

At length, the workers got Mr. Gassdrop on his back, Mr. Murrinkle holding his vigorous legs, John sitting athwart his torso. Looking down at Mr. Gassdrop was like glimpsing a flame-filled sulphurous pit.

"You come here," panted John. "You pretend to have had my Idea, you pose as a member, and try to fill us up with lies so as to get from us the employment no one else will give you. Well, get this straight before we chuck you out. If you were the only other man in England, this would be a one-man office."

"And you get this straight," said Mr. Gassdrop in a tone fierce but a little distorted by the fact that his collar was under his right ear and his tie draped about his nose. "I told you I'd get you, and I will, if it takes twenty years. Watch out, my cocky friend, for I'll grind you to powder when I do get you."

John's arm shot towards the door. "Out!" he yelled with fierce enjoyment. "Up, Jupiter." They seized Mr. Gassdrop, ran him through the private door and shot him neatly into the corridor locking the door after him.

"He's right about one thing," said Mr. Murrinkle, breathing fast and dusting his trousers with his hand. "You need an Office Manager. But I agree with you. I don't think he's the man. That was your point, wasn't it?"

CHAPTER TWO

I

TIME moved on like a river approaching a cataract. History—of which John and the Will to Peace Movement were now parts—continued to be written in a swift sprawling hand, in words and deeds of threat and terror, and the only lines on that dreadful page to be read without shrinking were the annals of the Movement. It was now a race between John and his organization for the one part and Adolf Hitler and the forces of evil on the other. The Fuehrer was not taking matters lying down. Not that we desire for a moment to suggest that the Master of Germany actually invaded Czecho-Slovakia as a reproof, much less a caution to John; but that and similar events were affairs of great concern to the Central Executive of the Will to Peace Movement. Nineteen thirty-eight had vanished with its foul records of duplicity, hastening on villainous foot into the silent caverns of Eternity, casting behind it as it went a sinister glance at its successor.

Viewed in a long perspective, things were going well with the Movement. As Mr. Murrinkle said, if it were not for the Fuehrer's readily exhaustible patience, if they had had fifty years or so to do their job, it would have been a cinch. Two whole floors of Number Four Stinton Street were now required to house the staff of the Movement. The red car knew most of the main roads and many of the secondary ones of the Island Kingdom, for there were no places of any consequence, and few of no consequence at all, which John had not visited, or where there were not Peace Centres. The membership was now colossal, for Mr. Murrinkle's methods and John's burning eloquence had pierced deeply into what the Public Liaison had long ago called the Numerical Public, those who joined because so many others had done so. There were some very distinguished members, and perhaps among these, the most enthusiastic

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were no other than Miss Eleanor Drumme, Young Jeremiah, and Major Eltham Chukes. They were the more enthusiastic because the Movement was not only doing a great work, but was the only Benevolent Institution which had ever been known to pay Old Mr. Drumme anything back. So rich, however, had it become, that the Central Executive had repaid the old gentleman his initial advances, whereupon three new members were instantly enrolled, as whom there was none so keen about the Leader, or so affectionate towards him.

Having mentioned, for the first time, the Central Executive, it will be necessary to inform the reader who comprised it, and how they came to occupy their positions. John Klooner was, naturally, the Chairman. On his right at the meetings sat Old Mr. Drumme; and on his left, Mr. Grindrod. The others were Mr. Trumper and Joe Gearie; and a journalist called Julian Egge. At the table at every meeting, recording the Minutes, sat Miss Plenditt. They formed a colourful group. It is part of the history of the Movement to learn how each won his place.

II

The morning after Mr. Trumper had put his five shillings on John's desk, and thus become a fully accredited member, he received a prompt acknowledgment sent out by Miss Plenditt. Twenty-four hours later he rang her to ask when she proposed to send that which she had already so faithfully sent.

"I posted it to you the day before yesterday," she said. "Never mind. I'll send you another."

"It happens," said the crafty Mr. Trumper, "that I have to come past your office in about ten minutes time. I'll look in and collect it if you'll have it ready."

"Certainly," agreed Miss Plenditt. "You're a bit fussy about receipts, I gather."

"Oh, very," said Mr. Trumper. "It's an inherited trait. My father was terribly fussy about receipts."

"Is that so?" said Miss Plenditt. "Well, it'll be ready for you."

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Mr. Trumper rang off, and putting on his hat, told Joe that if Mr. Trebbe came in, he was to be informed that Mr. Trumper had gone to the chemist round in the Arcade to buy some aspirin.

"I've got some here," said Joe, opening his drawer.

"No, you haven't," said Mr. Trumper, opening the door.

Miss Plenditt would have taken Mr. Trumper's breath away if some of the sharpest hills in the Home Counties had not often failed to do so. Instead, she took his heart away. She looked to Mr. Trumper like a compendium of all the scenery he had ever enjoyed on his many walking tours. He took the receipt from her hand, and thrust it, crumpled, into his trouser pocket. Miss Plenditt opened her eyes in comment—her beautiful eyes so full of a promising mischief that ravished Mr. Trumper. With a gulp, he pulled the receipt out of his pocket and, keeping his eyes on her face, slowly put it back again.

"What's that for?" asked Miss Plenditt.

"To see if it worked twice," said Mr. Trumper.

"Nothing ever does—with me," said Miss Plenditt.

"But things do work once?" asked Mr. Trumper earnestly.

"Most things—yes," agreed Miss Plenditt.

"Come out with me to-night, then," said Mr. Trumper. Miss Plenditt laughed.

"Certainly," she said.

Mr. Trumper again took the crumpled receipt out of his pocket.

"Here you are," he said. "I don't really want this, you know."

"Keep it," said Miss Plenditt, "out of respect for your father."

Mr. Trumper had believed there was nothing he liked better than a good long walk taken at an exceedingly rapid pace. He had been wrong. There was one thing, as it turned out, and that was being with Miss Plenditt. They went to the pictures, and she looked at the film, and he looked most of the time at her, with no sense of having to ask the management for a return of his money. Afterwards they had supper at a quiet place in Air Street, where you could sit and talk without either shouting over the band or mumbling under the neighbours' ears.

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The long strong face of Mr. Trumper wore an expression of fatuous content. He gazed at his companion and his mind purred. The mere fact that she opened her mouth to let out English words seemed to fill him with delight. He sat in entranced joy. It was a thing to be devoutly thankful for that Joe Gearie could not see him in this condition.

"How do you get on with John?" he asked, mainly for the sake of hearing a few more words pop out of her delicious mouth.

"Very well," she said, giving him only two.

"What do you think of him?" asked Mr. Trumper.

"What would you think of me," said Miss Plenditt, "if I worked for you and spent the evenings discussing you with strange men?"

"I'm not a strange man," said Mr. Trumper. "And John is a very old friend of mine. The case is entirely different."

"Maybe," said Miss Plenditt. "Still—I don't mind saying that I think he's very kind, and very clever."

"And very handsome, of course?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I do, though that's never a recommendation with me."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Mr. Trumper, glancing into a too-handly mirror.

"But as I only try things once, that doesn't matter either, does it?"

This remark did not have the depressing effect it might have had, for stimulated to a feeling of greatness by the presence of beauty, Mr. Trumper was thinking in terms of Leadership.

"I'll tell you one mistake I think John's making in the conduct of the Movement," he said. "He ought to bring it in line with modern methods. If I were running the outfit——"

Miss Plenditt knew the symptoms, and prepared to listen admiringly. The woman pays for her entertainment in one way or another. Mr. Trumper pulled out an unaccustomed cigarette case and offered it.

"Do you mind if I smoke my pipe?" he asked. Miss Plenditt did not mind. He lit her cigarette and his own pipe and settled comfortably down in his chair, looking raptly through his smoke clouds.

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"It's not aggressive enough," he said. "If it were my job, I should form a corps of the young men, put 'em in some sort of a uniform—say white flannels and sweaters—symbolical yet different—and train 'em."

"What for?" asked Miss Plenditt. "Scrapping? You can't have that in a Movement like ours."

"Of course not," agreed Mr. Trumper. "But it would be a public testimony, and they could defend the Leader and——"

"And all the old excuses for a private army and a damn good set to," said Miss Plenditt. "But you know, that's a grand idea. There's nothing like a rough house, and you're quite right, we couldn't take a fair part in one; though you look as if you could."

Mr. Trumper smiled complacently, and sent up a triumphant blast of blue smoke. "Yes," he continued, "and wouldn't I like the job of organizing the Peace Boys"—his fancy worked well under the spell of Miss Plenditt and her laughing eyes—"or you could call 'em the Panthers of Peace, eh? What about that?"

It seemed that Miss Plenditt thought well of that; in fact, Mr. Trumper, gazing at her, thought some terrible twaddle about what a grand little comrade she would be in a tight corner. How grand, he was one day to learn.

Contrary to her stated principle, Miss Plenditt repeated the experience of spending the evening with Mr. Trumper. In fact, she was soon making a habit of it, so that he had the great and signal honour of being mingled—as a thought—with her early morning cup of tea, of forming an agreeable background to the business of the day, and of dwelling sleepily with her final cup of Ovaltine. In short, as she told her friend at the flat, she had a Thing about Mr. Trumper. As for him, if he had not known that his symptoms were traceable to the effect of Miss Plenditt, he would have gone to the expense of consulting a specialist about them.

One morning, when John had dictated the last of his letters to her, he said, "Miss Plenditt, take down this advertisement and have it inserted in the *Monitor* to-morrow morning: 'Wanted—an Office Manager——' "

Miss Plenditt's pencil stopped. She looked up at John.

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"Have you thought of your friend, Mr. Trumper?" she said.

John stared for a moment. "By Jove I hadn't," he said. "You're always right. Get him on the telephone now."

Miss Plenditt got him, and there was no delay.

III

Within half an hour of that great moment when Mr. Trumper had returned to the office of Village Estates Building Society, rubbing his hands with the soap of Love and Fortune, there was a thunder of feet on the stairs of Number Four Stinton Street, like the sound of an angry rogue elephant. They reached the top and the door of Miss Plenditt's office was thrown open to reveal, red and angry of face, Mr. Joe Gearie.

"Want to see John—Mr. Klooner," he panted. "At once—urgent."

John was in, and instructed that Joe should at once be admitted to his presence. Joe marched in, folded his arms, lowered his head, and fixed an angry and reproachful glance on the Leader.

"Sit down, Joe," said John.

Joe stalked over and surveyed John long before he spoke. John laughed a little impatiently and asked Joe to come to the point.

"How long have we been friends?" demanded Joe theatrically.

"Three years," said John promptly.

"And how long has Trumper been a friend of yours?"

"Three years, of course. The same time. What about it?"

"Then why wasn't I given the chance to serve the Movement?" demanded Joe. "I, who thoroughly believe in it. I, who gave it my support from the word 'go,' I who have proved my ability under your very nose? Why? Tell me that?"

"I'm very busy, Joe," said the Leader.

Joe pointed a finger, an accusing finger, at John. "You have made," he said, "a colossal blunder. I am the better administrator of the two. If you had hinted to me that you needed help, I would have given it. I gather you are going to pay Trumper a salary."

"Of course," said John. "Naturally. We want the Office Manager to remain alive."

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At this mention of the glamorous title so recklessly bestowed on another, Joe groaned. Recovering, he continued in the tone of a saddened and disillusioned Napoleon.

"I would have done the job free for you," he said. "That is the measure of my wish to serve the Movement."

"Very well, Joe," said John. "In that case, I offer you the appointment, created by the Central Executive at their last meeting, and not yet filled, of Meetings Organizer. In that capacity you could serve the Movement in a very full sense. There is no salary, but all expenses will be paid. Do you accept it?"

"What," demanded Joe, folding his arms again, "does it demand? And what are the duties?"

"It demands," replied John, rising to his platform height, "gifts of organization, of tact, and of goodwill; of loyal and unselfish service, and of complete devotion to the Movement. The duties are to arrange all my meetings, book halls and arrange local publicity in advance, and see to it in every way that my visits to Peace Centres and Branches are comfortable and successful."

That is the sort of thing that comes of dramatic offers of free service. But there was nothing of reserve in the way in which Joe shot out his hand and clasped John's.

"I accept," he said. "I am the Meetings Organizer of the Will to Peace Movement."

John sat down at his desk again. "Thank you, Joe," he said. "The Central Executive, on which you will now enjoy a seat, will be very satisfied with the appointment I have made."

The Meetings Organizer strode to the door with a purposeful stride. There he halted and turned round, again fixing a piercing glance on the Leader, who returned it.

"Well, Joe?" he said.

"Is there any possibility," asked Joe, "that this post may, in the course of time, become a salaried one?"

"I should think," replied the Leader, "that the chances are strongly against that happening."

"I thought possibly not," said Joe.

"You were right," replied the Leader unfeelingly.

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"Good morning," said Joe, and the door closed on him.

The Leader smiled and rang for Miss Plenditt. He had much to do before he went out.

IV

Not upon these gratuitous terms did Mr. Julian Egge enter the service of the Movement. It would have been questioned by those who knew him best whether he entered anything, even the 'Plenteous Heart,' the small hotel where he lunched every day, on anything approaching generous terms. He had, however, the best of excuses; namely, circumstances the most harrowing, luck the most abominable. It was not want of the true generosity of the spirit that made Mr. Egge a trifle reluctant in matters financial. It was progressive impoverishment due to misfortunes the like of which hardly any person now alive has been obliged to suffer. All this he had the opportunity to explain to Mr. Trumper, who, having become Office Manager at Stinton Street, gave up the Barrow Cuisine, and now lunched like a gentleman at the 'Plenteous Heart,' which was not only near the office, but in the excellent habit of giving the largest half-crown lunch in the West End.

One day he shared a table with Mr. Egge, whom to see was to remark and remember. He was a squat powerful man, with dark hair and eyes, gold-filled teeth, and a trick of lazy gesture, as if he had seen and done so many astonishing things, and had experience on such gigantic lines that he lived upon a bored memory from which the last drop of astonishment had long been squeezed. He wore a broad-brimmed black hat, a large and shabby overcoat which he never buttoned, and a flowing bow tie of black silk. He was sixty and looked forty-five.

Mr. Trumper had nodded to him, and was now busily engaged with his roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Evidently the gusto with which the young man ate amused Mr. Egge, who was smoking a Brazilian cigarette in a long holder, and now smiled a lazy smile, stretching out one arm as he did so in a gesture of ennui.

"I suppose," he said, "it would surprise you if I told you that at

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your age my midday meal was four large steaks cut with my own knife from a beast I had just slain."

"No," replied Mr. Trumper, "for my father, who in his prime weighed twenty-two stones, frequently ate a whole sheep for his breakfast. But times are different. I cannot afford it."

Mr. Egge grinned appreciatively. "I love a damn good liar," he said. "Permit me to introduce myself—Julian Egge, traveller, explorer, soldier, friend of Princes, connoisseur, artist, ex-millionaire—and now, for no sin, journalist."

"How d'ye do," said Mr. Trumper. "Desmond Trumper at your service. Will you take wine with me?"

"I see you're a gentleman, whatever your income," said Mr. Egge. "Waiter, bring me a double brandy, as this gentleman is so kind. I remember when I was building a railway through Assam——"

"Engineer, too," said Mr. Trumper.

"No, no," said Mr. Egge, raising his brandy in salutation. "I can't claim that. I couldn't do a really big job, but my friend the ruling head of that part was disappointed in a contract, so I undertook to have the job ready for his son's coming of age—just a little thing I could do for him. If you ever go—or perhaps you've been, sir?—no?—well, you'll travel over metals laid under my unworthy direction. But I take no pride in that—what was I saying?—oh, yes, the celebration—the liquor. Well"—Mr. Egge leaned forward with a chuckle—"when I say that I personally was accountable for a barrel of the best sherry before dinner——"

"My father——" began Mr. Trumper.

"God rest his soul," said Mr. Egge, raising a pious glass to the bibulous memory of the late Mr. Trumper.

"And now," sighed Mr. Egge, "with millions of money behind me, the splendid pavilions of my youth empty and deserted, I face an impoverished future as a journalist. Sic transit."

"Oddly enough," said Mr. Trumper, lying with relish, "those very words——"

"Appear on the respected Pater's tomb?" said Mr. Egge. "Quite. Very tasteful. And so true . . . about him. But not yet, perhaps, in

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the same measure, about us. Eh?" On this he gave Mr. Trumper a wink and a chuckle so pleasant that the young man forgot himself so far as to offer another drink.

"And what, may I ask, occupies your days, young sir?" asked Mr. Egge, feeling, perhaps, that a second double brandy called for more interest in the living Trumper than had been shown in the dead one.

Mr. Trumper told him, with many delightful embellishments, all about the Movement, adding a few tasteful scrolls anent the Office Manager's power.

"Indeed?" and "Splendid," said Mr. Egge many times over, doing his best to make his brandy last out the narration. When it was done, he leaned forward, and stared at Mr. Trumper.

"Can you take a tip from an old campaigner?" he asked. "Are you above a hint breathed on you from the forgotten wayside?"

Breathed on one was right, thought Mr. Trumper.

"You've forgotten one thing needful for complete success," said Mr. Egge, and leaned back against his settle.

"Give it a name," said Mr. Trumper, "and we'll have it."

Mr. Egge leaned forward again. "Will you have it?" he said. "Will you indeed have it?"

"Depends what it is," said Mr. Trumper. "If it's a railway through Assam——"

"Oh," chuckled Mr. Egge. "You're a rogue." Then he became very earnest again. "No," he went on, "it's not a railway. It's an Organ."

This was the last thing Mr. Trumper would have supposed they wanted. "An Organ?" he echoed. "It's an Office, you know, not a Cathedral."

"No, no," said Mr. Egge impatiently. "Not that sort of an Organ."

The only other variety Mr. Trumper could think of on the spur of the moment was so inappropriate to any place but a butcher's shop that he did not care to insult Mr. Egge's intelligence further.

"Oh, I see," he said, working his right hand up and down. "Not that sort of an Organ."

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"No," said Mr. Egge. "An Organ of Opinion—a Journal dedicated to your uses and employments."

"Oh . . . a paper," said Mr. Trumper. The light spread. "By Gosh," he admitted, "that's a corking good idea."

"All mine are," remarked Mr. Egge complacently. "I always remember what the President of Bolivia said to me on the occasion when he presented me with the Medal of the Grand Pelican of the Rockies——"

"And nothing could have been more appropriate," said Mr. Trumper hastily. "Now this Organ idea wants thinking about."

Mr. Egge produced paper and pencil, and cleared a space on the tablecloth. "In the days," he said, "when a gentleman was a gentleman, and mine host was not, I should have set out these notes on the cloth and had it carried to my rooms. In eighteen-eighty, in Paris, George Moore and I——"

"Well, let's do it on paper and save any argument, shall we?" asked Mr. Trumper.

"Certainly," said Mr. Egge courteously. "Now first, one must always decide on a name."

"What about *Movement News*—or *Peace Herald*?" asked Mr. Trumper.

With a look of majestic sympathy, Mr. Egge laid down his pencil and clasped his hands together, as he must often have done with George Moore on the boulevards. "My dear friend," he said. "You are a nice young man, and a most amiable liar; but you are not a poet. There is only one name for this great Organ. In these dark times, when not a gleam of hope brightens the world except, of course, your own most excellent Movement, there can be but one title. And that title"—Mr. Egge raised a lyrical arm and pointed to the ceiling—"that title must be BLUE SKY." His voice rose to a musical roar as he announced this, and he looked for the applause.

Mr. Trumper was impressed. It seemed so very right. "That's bright," he said.

"Bright?" cried Mr. Egge, "it's genius. Genius so seldom encountered, that when it is, it only seems bright. God. What a world. In Abyssinia, genius is recognized. I was there when——"

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"Yes, yes, it is. I see that," said Mr. Trumper. "BLUE SKY. It's genius. I'm sorry about bright."

"Very well, then," said Mr. Egge. "If we're at the right level, let us proceed to the discussion of the details. But first, who is to edit this great journal—who is to steer it through the stormy seas of controversy."

Though there was only one answer, it was a little time before Mr. Trumper uttered it.

"Thank you," said Mr. Egge, when it came. "Thank you. Slow delivery, but the tribute is appreciated in spite of tardiness. Now then, the details. . . ."

V

It is an extraordinary thing that with the Bible and Shakespeare still largely unread, there should be any sale for the multitudes of magazines, the mountains of reading matter that appeared on the bookstalls and in the newsagents' shops before 1939 came to a close. Evidently the millions of workers of all kinds have a desire to read something. Possibly no one has mentioned to them the extreme cheapness and availability of the two treasures of literature aforementioned, as well as the enormous amount that still remains for them to read when they have tired by familiarity of the Bishops of James One, and the Swan of Avon. Be that as it may, there was a fine spring morning of nineteen thirty-nine when amongst the piles of periodical literature on stalls and in shops, the reds and blues, the Alsatian dogs and the pretty girls, the large black type and the artistic-coloured lettering of a thousand covers, there appeared a new striking magazine entitled BLUE SKY. On the front cover was a great expanse of hopeful azure, the picture of a Blue Day at Sea, a Stevenson vision in printer's ink. The magazine was large, profusely illustrated, and there was considerably more jam than pill. The thousands who hurried past the bookstalls of Waterloo, who loitered by the shops of Leicester Square, who stopped to snatch a daily paper at London Bridge, Holborn or Aldgate, looked at this new excuse to spend a graphic threepence; looked and bought. And buying, they vindicated the genius of Mr. Julian Egge.

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For—let us have no doubt on this point—there had been uneasiness about him in the minds of the Central Executive, when—at Mr. Trumper's earnest request—they had interviewed him. When he had gone out of John's office to permit freedom of discussion, he had only one champion—to wit, the Office Manager; and he perhaps was animated more by principle than conviction. To begin with, Mr. Egge had arrived—and had subsequently conducted himself—in a warmly expansive manner. He had shown the greatest interest in the several members of the Central Executive. There had not been a juncture of the discussion which he had not illustrated by reference to his extraordinary experience, wide travels and ornate acquaintance. When, with an airy if diffuse wave of the hand, he had gone into the outer office, the members of the Executive looked at one another. Old Mr. Drumme was the first to speak.

"Since the days of the good Baron Munchausen," he remarked, "there cannot have existed such a man."

"I don't know the gent. you mention, sir," said Mr. Grindrod. "But if ever I heard such thundering lies—well, he's a marvel. He don't even seem to expect you to believe him either."

"No," agreed Joe Gearie, waving a hand at the door. "He just lies for pleasure."

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Drumme, smiling gently. "And we ought not to be too censorious about that, when we reflect what we owe to artists of that type in every age. It is just a question of whether we are justified in becoming the patrons of such an artist."

"He may be a liar, born, bred and French-polished," said Mr. Trumper, "but he's a journalist, every inch of him."

"Quite. Quite," said Mr. Drumme, as if Mr. Trumper had remarked that Mr. Egge was water, but for all that he was wet.

John looked round at his Executive, inviting comment by a glance. Mr. Murrinkle sat silent, with folded arms, and when John looked at him, he shook his head. "Later," he said. "Let's hear the others first."

"And then," said Old Mr. Drumme, "there is another aspect of his conversation with us which I find perturbing—a little, you

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know; do not overestimate my concern, for I have seldom been more lavishly entertained than by Mr. Egge. But you will remember that he claims at the least acquaintance, and in most cases a close friendship with all the considerable literary figures of this and other European countries. Now if that is not so, he is a circumstantial liar of the most fertile order; while if, on the other hand, it is true, is he not a most undesirable character; and ought we to consent to a person with such associates joining us in this Movement?"

"Besides," said Joe Gearie, "on his own statement, he's a Jack-of-all-Trades. You told us that he said to you that he was an explorer, a traveller, a soldier and all the rest—and this morning he added a couple of trades—he said he was a Novelist and a Poet."

"Bit of an Easter Egge, like," said Mr. Grindrod, with memories of his childhood in Somerset.

"Now look here," said Mr. Trumper, "we can't have it both ways. Either he's a liar, in which case it doesn't matter what he says, for all we require of him is his journalistic powers, and he's given proof of those; or else he's telling the truth, in which case, he's a Jack-of-all-Trades. But," went on Mr. Trumper, as one who made a very good point, "to be in *Who's Who* is supposed to be a mark of great distinction." Here Old Mr. Drumme smiled and shook his head gently. "Well, do a bit of research in that book, and you'll alter your views about Jacks-of-all-Trades. I think this man Egge is what we require. You all agree that his idea of an Organ is a good one. Let him try to run it. You can get rid of him if he's no good."

Mr. Grindrod drew a long breath between his teeth. "Can you?" he asked sceptically. "I think you'd want a crowbar and a cold chisel."

"Well, Jupiter?" said John. "Give us your views. You ought to know something about the matter."

"Weigh it up for yourselves," said Mr. Murrinkle. "He's been abroad. He's probably been to Dieppe on a day trip, and he says he's been all over the world. He's probably seen Queen Victoria through field-glasses, and he says he's the friend of Princes. It's quite likely that a chap like that has corrected proofs, so he says he's

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a Poet and a Novelist. It sticks out feet. The man's a born journalist. And that's what you want, isn't it? Or do you want a retired clergyman to run BLUE SKY for you?"

Old Mr. Drumme smiled a paternal smile at Miss Plenditt, who was listening to the discussion with bright interest.

"And what is the opinion," the old gentleman asked, "of our young friend, Miss Plenditt, with her woman's intuition?"

The Executive stifled a sigh. That was the sort of question which old gentlemen who were important financial figures had to be allowed to ask. It was generally felt that such were the last flickers of vitality. Miss Plenditt smiled.

"I think he's nice," she said. "Don't I wish I'd been the places and done the things he says he has; thinking about them is just as good and a lot less trouble."

"Call him in," said the Leader. When Mr. Egge was again seated before the Executive, John made him a speech, appointing him to this great new editorship, and the care of the Movement's interests in this respect. To these words Mr. Egge listened, probably, with eyes closed. At their conclusion he opened his eyes, and then his mouth.

"One moment," said Joe Gearie, clapping a monitorial eye on Mr. Egge. "Do you believe thoroughly in the aims of the Movement?"

"Is that," asked Mr. Egge of John, "a condition of appointment?"

"Naturally," replied John.

"Well, then," said Mr. Egge, "I do—most wholeheartedly."

His eyes wandered round the faces of the Executive and came to rest on that of Miss Plenditt. He smiled gently. "Allow me to congratulate you, gentlemen," he said, "on having secured one of the few remaining men of genius in this country, which, as you know, is temperamentally hostile to genius. I spent the happiest years of my life—the 'nineties—in Raipur."

"I was there in the 'nineties," said Old Mr. Drumme. Mr. Egge gazed at him. "Did I say Raipur," he said. "I meant Colombo—I did not reach Raipur till Oh-Five. However, the Chief of Police there——"

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"Will you step into my office now to discuss details?" asked Mr. Trumper.

"Ah, yes," said Mr. Egge, rising. "Those details again."

CHAPTER THREE

I

HE who desires political empire in England must first conquer Suburbia. This great truth was clearly recognized in Stinton Street, and to this task John bent all his powers. This was wise use of his time. To have been in the office would have been a waste of it, and that beautiful inner room of his was now seldom occupied. It was the background for photographs of John, and the setting for Press interviews; otherwise, it was never used except when Joe Gearie went in during the lunch hour to sit in John's chair and rather moodily imagine what it would feel like to be the Leader.

Before nineteen thirty-nine was more than a rather fretful infant of slightly alarming promise, John had visited every suburb of London. Not one Broadway or High Road but the red car had sped along it; not one Branch but had enjoyed the stimulus of a visit from the Chief; not one Peace Centre but had paraded its members and its flags to receive him.

Poplar and Limehouse, Canning Town and Stepney, Chingford and Chigwell, Waltham and Wanstead, Surbiton and Epsom, Edmonton and Southgate, Ealing and Shepherd's Bush, Islington and Hackney, all the points of the most urban compass ever seen by a navigator in a red car, were visited and nurtured and instructed. In every one of these places there appeared and grew an organism born and fashioned and fed from the office at Stinton Street. At a shout from Mr. Trumper there sprang up a body of Youths clad all in white, lithe and resolute. At the behest of a plump blue-eyed apparition, a Napoleon of organization, hot-foot and arm-waving, halls were hired, streamers flown across streets and meetings con-

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vened. On the demand of a Sonia Plenditt, the girl of the flying fingers, money forthcame—renewal of the quarterly subscription (adapted to the needs of the poorer neighbourhoods) a silver stream in response to the tersely-worded routine circular to unpunctual members. And every week, there flamed in the English heaven the sign that a Man of Genius was still with us. Julian Egge, from his office, sent out BLUE SKY to hearten and exhort the members with a roaring rhetoric, and to inveigle and titillate non-members with all the arts of a pictorial journalism the like of which, if it had ever been seen before, had been sufficiently forgotten to seem novel now. A whip-cracking Jupiter Murrinkle flew round the Branches, first in London and then in ever-widening circles in the provinces appointing Press and Publicity Officers, arranging courses for them ("Director and Professor of Publicity—Jupiter Murrinkle. Professor Emeritus of Journalism—Julian Egge—Professor of Public Psychology—Jos. Gearie.") Fortunately Mr. Egge was not perfectly clear about the word 'Emeritus.' Only on its addition would he consent to lecture on the course at all. And perhaps he was right—it made the difference between a Man of Genius and the Others. The platoons, companies and battalions of the Panthers of Peace were instructed shortly by Mr. Trumper to appoint their leaders and submit the names to him for approval. This instruction was conveyed in the now famous Office Circular, CO/Tactics/93 (a), which set out the qualifications required by Mr. Trumper in leaders, and which was quickly withdrawn from circulation on John's personal order. All copies were returned save one, issued to the Lambeth Branch, whose Secretary certified on oath that it had been burned. In fact, it fell into the hands of that great critic of letters and affairs, Wilmer Sleete, who published it in his weekly column in the *Rattler* under the heading of "Why Go to the Zoo?"

All England was thoroughly used, when it went to do its Saturday afternoon shopping or seek its Saturday afternoon pleasure to the spectacle of a company of Mr. Trumper's Panthers of Peace marching down the main street, or holding a meeting in a side-road, while burly representatives of the white-clad phalanx sold BLUE SKY to all who would buy; and they were many.

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The Empire of John Klooner widened in territory and multiplied in number of subjects; and as it thus pleasantly grew, it was consolidated, tied up, disciplined and prepared by the great machine at Stinton Street, just as it was blessed, informed and inspired by the personality and presence of the Leader, that Great Man who was, above all, the perfect result of the art of Mr. Jupiter Murrinkle, the consummation of that early promise, the goal of an unsleeping resolve.

II

Every morning, punctually at 9.30, when John was in London, he entered his office, and his glance fell immediately on his desk. Was it in search of mail, that questing stare? Or of telegrams, telephone messages, notes of callers, urgent summonses to the far ends of Britain. No. For things of that routine character were never allowed to come near the Leader. Miss Plenditt and Mr. Trumper saw to that. No. The Leader's eye sought for nothing less important, nothing less lovely and touching than a rose. And always, there it lay—its stem in silver foil, its petals dewy, its fragrance making sweet the neighbour air—there it lay in the very centre of the desk, a fair ghost of itself reflected in the deep polish of the wood. It was sent so as to arrive at 9.25 a.m. on the dot by Frote, the Piccadilly florist, and he never failed. Be the season what it might, be the weather what it would, it was June, rich and splendid, with John in his office at nine-thirty.

Then the Leader would take the rose up, smell its perfume, delicately touch it with his fingers, and then, turning to his mirror, he would carefully put it in a buttonhole built by the best tailor in Europe. The Leader was ready.

An Empire is a difficult thing to imagine, especially if it be an Empire of Ideas. It is even more difficult to love an Empire, to be loyal to it, to pay its imposts and levies. There must be symbols, and to the great host of his followers, John Klooner was the Symbol of the Idea, and the rose was the symbol, delicious, sweet, aristocratic, of John Klooner. And the red car, of course, for it was swift and powerful, opulent and mysterious. Nor to his followers alone

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were these symbols of significance. No one at Stinton Street will ever forget that tremendous moment when Mr. Trumper summoned the Executive (all except Old Mr. Drumme, who was in the middle of his rest period at Wimbledon) to his room, and shaking with glee, held up his copy of "Thump" that national organ of humorous comment, pointing at the full-page cartoon, which showed John in his car speeding along a dark road towards a dawn horizon. In his buttonhole was a great luminous rose like a lamp for his journey. A heavenly choir of most beautiful damsels, each wearing the badge of the Movement, and each having a pair of wings flew along beside and above him. They looked at him with adoring eyes, and sang an anthem as they flew and gazed. And the words of the anthem appeared below the cartoon:

"O my luv wears a red red rose
And drives a red red car."

Mr. Egge seized the copy of "Thump," and looked long at the cartoon, while Joe Gearie, Mr. Murrinkle and Miss Plenditt stared over his shoulder. Then the Man of Genius put the journal down and stared with awe-filled eyes at Mr. Trumper.

"My God," he said huskily. "He's arrived."

Cartoons of John abounded in other journals, and always the rose was the feature on which the cartoonist fastened. A suburban newspaper which took up an attitude of bitter enmity towards the Movement had a leading article about John and the Panthers of Peace, which was vulgarly headed "Roses and Pansies." The application of the Branches in the area served by this newspaper, for permission to call on the Editor was refused, though not officiously, by Mr. Trumper, who was later perturbed, though not astonished, to learn that the Editor had applied for police protection.

Meanwhile John, now an established and universally known figure in the national life, went about his business of visitation, addressing meetings and getting to know local Leaders in every place of any importance in the country. It may have been partly due to the shortness of his acquaintance with many of his followers, partly to the whirl in which his campaigning life was conducted, partly, perhaps, even to that inaccessibility which is at once the

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prerogative and penalty of true greatness; but the fact is, he did not attach as much importance as perhaps he ought to a very strange and very common phenomenon amongst the members. It would have struck you or me at once, if we had accompanied him on his visits, walking humbly and attentively in his presence.

It was this. The members were willing. They paid their five shillings subscriptions with an enviable freedom. They were eager. They made Peace Centres out of old halls and buildings, they joined (if they were young men) the Panthers of Peace. But nobody was doing any thinking. And the awful truth would have dawned in on you and me *that they were leaving all the thinking to John*. It is to be supposed that if he had had time to realize this, he would have resigned his office in an instant panic. But he was unable to spare long enough in any one case to observe that they believed that when they had paid their sub., set up the Centre, recruited the Panthers, and bought BLUE SKY, they were certain to get peace, because John knew where it was, and with their united five bobs, would undoubtedly purchase enough of it to go all round, with a bit over for the Germans.

Such, it seems, are the responsibilities of a great man, such the consequence of having an Idea.

III

Old Mr. Drumme had just been shown into John's office. He rarely came except for the meetings of the Central Executive, and when, as now, he paid a special call, it was an occasion marked in several ways. To begin with, the red lights snapped on over John's two doors—the one leading to Miss Plenditt's department, the other to the corridor—as soon as the old gentleman was seated before the Leader. Seeing the light, Miss Plenditt immediately rose, took two cards from her desk, and attached one to each of the doors. They bore in red letters the words

SECRET CONFERENCE

ON NO ACCOUNT DISTURB.

Finally, there was an unusual silence, a certain tension in the offices,

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produced by the severity of manner of the heads of departments, which in its turn was caused by anxiety as to what Old Mr. Drumme had come to say.

Inside the office, behind the cards and red lights, the Secret Conference began. Old Mr. Drumme put his hands one on top of the other on the silver knob of his stick.

"My dear boy," he began. "I am seriously perturbed."

"Why?" asked John. "All is going excellently, isn't it?"

"For a time," said Mr. Drumme, "all goes well, to outward appearance, with a man who has a mortal disease."

The Leader stared at his visitor. "That," he agreed, "is true enough. But do you intend to suggest that the Movement—no, you cannot mean it—that our Movement has a mortal disease?"

"I do," said Mr. Drumme firmly. "I do. You will judge by my appearance here this afternoon how gravely I view the business that brings me. I cannot discuss it with the Central Executive, for it does not concern them or any of them. It is a matter I can discuss only with you, for you alone can put it right."

"What is this mortal disease—which, I must point out, only you have discerned?" asked John.

"It is one of whose danger I warned you at the very beginning—indeed, when I discussed the Idea with Grindrod, I mentioned it to him, for it was the earliest of my perceptions concerning the whole affair."

Mr. Drumme paused as old gentlemen will. He produced a handsome silk handkerchief and wiped his nose. Comfortable again, he restored the handkerchief to his sleeve and cleared his throat.

"Go on," said the Leader.

"Yes," said Old Mr. Drumme. "Thank you. Now here it is in a nutshell. In all your speeches, in all your writings, you are treating your Idea as if its value lay in its intellectual power. You are constantly attempting to talk sense about it."

"Well," cried John. "Of course I am. What am I supposed to talk and write about it—nonsense?"

"Exactly," said Old Mr. Drumme. "For essentially that is what it is. I remember telling you that its value lay in its being a Force—I

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hoped a Timely Force. Unless you lay my words to heart, I must tell you that it is my considered conviction that it will not be Timely. It will be too late. And all this machinery"—the old gentleman waved a hand in the direction of the general office—"all this effort, all this power will have been wasted."

"But," cried John, almost angrily, "I cannot talk nonsense, deliberately talk nonsense, if that's what you mean."

The old gentleman leaned forward.

"Can you not?" he said, fixing his gaze on John. "And why can you not? Have you not studied the contemporary world? Are not your enemies, the men who oppose with every breath and in every moment your Will to Peace, masters of nonsense? Do you suppose that Germany would be in her present belligerent and highly-prepared condition if only sense had been talked there during the past few years? Do you imagine that Mussolini could have governed Italy and led her into her recent exploits with any hope of success if he had chosen to talk sense? Who, in the world of ideas, whether of conquest or of progress, talks sense to the people? Some leaders talk ugly nonsense. There is beautiful nonsense. Can you not talk that kind of nonsense?"

"No," said John. "I cannot."

"No," repeated the old gentleman. "You cannot. You must pay your brains the empty tribute of talking sense. You must flatter your feeling of being logical and cogent and reasonable and goodness knows what else. You are putting yourself and your own vanity before the health of your Movement, sir. When the members of one body are at ill accord, it is the body that must suffer and die. There is ill accord in this body. Your Idea, which I supported from the moment I heard of it, is the purest nonsense. You bid fair to ruin everything by trying, in vanity and self-love, to talk sense about it. And that is at the root of the mortal disease which, as yet hardly to be observed, will strike at the Movement and destroy it."

John leaned back in his chair, clasped his fingers together and looked at the shining top of his desk.

"And what symptoms have you noticed?" he asked. "What have you seen in my utterances that perturbs you so much?"

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"There is," replied Old Mr. Drumme, "so much of vanity in the make-up of the human spirit, that it is a constant marvel to me that we are not all murdered in our beds by neighbours who have resented some small criticism; or pounded to death by some genius in the street, for failure to recognize him. Do you not know—has it never occurred to you—can it have happened that no one has ever drawn your attention to the interesting fact that sense is sense because it lacks inspiration? Inspiration is after all only lunacy in a most acceptable form. The only capital crime ought to be that of being dull. You are within an ace, my dear boy, my poor friend, of becoming dull."

"Of becoming dull!" echoed John, stung to the quick.

Adultery, cruelty, lying, fraud—any of these, if alleged against a man, leave him at least one defiant swagger, one cynical smile. But to be charged with dulness! And especially he, the Leader of a great Movement, the adored, the abused, the reported, the talked-of, known by photograph and cartoon from one end of his country to the other—to be accused of dulness. With Leaderlike swiftness, John reflected that to make such a charge was the other capital offence.

"Yes, indeed," went on Old Mr. Drumme. "If the people of Bethnal Green are as logical as I imagine them to be, the discrepancy between your message and your words at the meeting last Thursday must have made them doubt not only your worthiness, but your sanity."

"Because, presumably, I was too sane," said John indignantly.

"Exactly," said Mr. Drumme again. "I have great hope, great hope indeed for you and the Movement if you can see that clearly. You spoke, you see, like an eminent barrister seeking to persuade the court that his client, whom the jury gravely suspect to be a man, is, in fact, as the client claims to be, a poached egg. Now reason, however highly-developed, cannot establish the truth of such a proposition. Only passion—that is, nonsense on fire—can hope to do so. And your proposition is no wilder—certainly no wilder—than that a man is, in fact, not a man at all, but a poached egg. What you set out to teach, the mechanics of your Idea, will not, cannot

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prevent a war. But anything that assembles enough human beings all resolved that there shall be no war is valuable. It is the will that matters, not the thought. For it is long since anything worthy of the name of thought was publicly heard of."

"I see," said John. "So that if I told them that believing I was a poached egg would prevent a war, that would do just as well?"

The old gentleman nodded. "Certainly," he said. "If sufficient people could be induced, by passionate nonsense, to believe it, there would be no war, for the simple and sufficient reason that they were united in not desiring it, organized so as not to co-operate. Can I prevail on you to believe for a moment that there reposes no hope for us in what man so proudly calls his intellect, and especially to believe that your own value as a Timely Force lies in youth and power and conviction."

"There you are," cried John triumphantly. "As you say—conviction. I've just *got* to believe in my Idea myself, or we're lost at once. You see?"

Old Mr. Drumme shook his head slowly. "Of course," he said, "my dear boy, it's all so elementary. Conviction is not a matter of the intellect, which may or may not support conviction. You must both believe it and not believe it."

Mr. Drumme smiled as he gave this counsel. If Mr. Grindrod had been present, he would undoubtedly have regarded the remark as further proof of the fact that the old gentleman was a wonderful clever man.

"I am getting tired," said Old Mr. Drumme. "I cannot talk to you much longer. You do not know what fatigue is. You know only what it is to be tired so that an hour's sleep makes you forget it. But I will tell you what fatigue is. It is a cloud that comes over your mind and your body so that nothing, neither sense nor nonsense, passion nor intellect, war or peace, health or pain, poverty or wealth, matter any more at all, and you know that there is no sleep that can restore what I have lost and you have in abundance. Let me tell you what is in my mind and then I will go. You are a Great Leader. You must be sincere yet a hypocrite. You must believe and

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not believe. You must talk nonsense that is more than sense. You must use the voice to mean things that the heart does not, and that the mind would never promise. You must be yourself and yet be all the others. You must be a mystery that all men can read, and yet have secrets that none can search. You must be capable of all things and yet above them. You must have faith in nothing that you may achieve the one thing that is more than you, or your brains or your vanity. All this you must do, that mortal disease may not destroy the Movement that is Yourself and yet has nothing to do with yourself." The old man rose. "Now I must go. No. Don't ring for anyone. I can manage."

He looked quizzically at John. "Well?" he said.

John had risen and looked bleakly back at Old Mr. Drumme.

"I do not understand," he replied.

"If there were an operation for the removal of intellect," said Mr. Drumme, "I would arrange for you to have it, that your other and stronger parts might have their say with you."

So saying, he left the room slowly and John rang for Miss Plenditt, feeling that she would be a nice change.

IV

In spite of John's cold assertion that he did not understand, it was noticed that his meetings, always a success, now became, each one, an amazing phenomenon. Gone were the attempts to make, in cold reason, a case for the Idea. With a mounting passion, he hurled it at his audiences. He seized on anything that would kindle him and influence his hearers—a juicy attack in the Press on him or the Movement, criticism by speakers at meetings of other parties and associations. In short, he talked like the voice of God.

He argued no longer. He employed a spiritual flame-thrower. Stunned, dazzled, delighted, captivated, hypnotized, his audiences listened to this best, this most vital of all entertainments, this Leader who shone and flashed and was glittering and dangerous, like molten gold.

He whirled about England from meeting to meeting, and his

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reputation as an orator spread. The newspapers noticed the flashing change and commented, each after its fashion upon it.

"It is computed," said the *Monitor*, "that Mr. Klooner has uttered seven million words in the last three months. This is in itself a remarkable feat. But what is even more remarkable is the fact that among them all, he has managed to avoid the inclusion of one single word of sense."

These words appeared while John was at Nottingham, and within an hour of reading them at his hotel, he received a telegram from Old Mr. Drumme:

"Patient out of danger. Disease mortal
no longer. Continue treatment."

To which John replied:

"Patient growing rapidly. Thirty-two
thousand extra members this month."

CHAPTER FOUR

I

IT may well be that the citizens of ancient Westhampton have now almost forgotten the visit of John Klooner to their town. Since that great day, the place has suffered visits from the Luftwaffe. Bombs have rained down upon its streets, and flame has ravaged its main thoroughfares. But nothing short of such treatment could have erased from the public memory the scenes associated with John's brief sojourn.

It was Mr. Trumper who so strongly urged that a state visit should be paid by the Leader in person.

"You ought to go to Westhampton soon, John," he had said. "It's one of our strongholds. There are three hundred of the Peace Boys attached to the Branch."

He smiled agreeably as he sat on John's desk.

"They're grand boys down at Westhampton," he went on. "The

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toughest anywhere. You ought to see 'em dealing with interrupters and warmongers."

Duly impressed with the need to honour these tough warriors of Peace, the Leader agreed to make the visit, and Joe Gearie was instructed to arrange it. It must be allowed that in the events attending John's visit, some of the warmth and liveliness arose from Joe's natural ardour in making the preliminary arrangements. The rest of what happened was merely an expression of that refreshing candour and freedom from cant which characterized politics in the days before the war.

When Joe arrived in Westhampton on a Saturday a fortnight before John's projected visit, his first call was naturally on the Local Leader at the Will To Peace Headquarters in the High Street. He stepped briskly out of the train, glared about him, left the station and set off on foot towards the Branch Office.

He walked for two reasons. One was to survey the territory. The other was to feel the sense of power that the Meetings Organizer from the Central Office always enjoyed when he visited a provincial hole like Westhampton. Even though the citizens did not recognize that a great man was in their midst, Joe did. And that was enough. He strode along, looking with a kindly contempt at the shops so unlike Regent Street, the quaint lumbering trams, and the policemen who looked so amateur. Thus gazing about him, he failed to notice a very large young man in a black shirt who was selling the journal of his organization, and who now stepped back to make room for a woman with a perambulator to pass along the pavement. The large young man stepped heavily though accidentally on Joe's foot. Joe let out a terrific tenor yell and clutched the young man's arm in an agony.

"You clumsy great elephant," cried Joe. "Look where you're putting your feet. You've crippled me for life."

The large young man looked at Joe and laughed.

"You've got eyes, haven't you?" he said unsympathetically. "I can't look all ways at once. I'm not a spider."

"I could tell you what you are," said Joe. "And what's more, you haven't any manners. You could at least apologize."

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"Well, if it'll do your foot any good," said the young man, "I'm sorry. Now what about buying one of my papers? That'll do your politics good."

Joe's pain had eased down to a terrible ache, so that he was able to survey the elephant and his wares. A look of cold contempt came to chase the agony out of his eyes.

"No thanks," he said. "You've trodden on my feet. I don't want my brains trodden on as well—and pay for it."

The young man's face took on a look of ugly displeasure. He fixed his eyes on the little badge of the Will To Peace Movement in the lapel of Joe's coat. He smiled a sneering smile.

"Oh, I see," he said. "You're one of the Persil boys—all white trousers and no stomach for a fight. If I'd seen that at first, I'd have trodden on your face instead of your foot."

Joe's face, usually a brick red, now went pale with rage. His blue eyes became so much like daggers that it was a wonder the glass of his spectacles survived whole.

"Speaking of faces," he said in tones of concentrated fury, "let me tell you that I never forget one. But if I had the worst memory for faces in the world, I shouldn't forget yours, for I never saw its equal. We shall meet again, my friend."

"I hope so," said the young man, looking at Joe like a cannibal. "I hope so; when there aren't so many people about for you to S.O.S."

Joe had not stayed to hear this sinister remark, but had gone, scorning to limp, even to ease his toes which he felt sure were crushed within his boot, and lying in a pool of rapidly congealing blood.

When he reached the safety of the Will To Peace Office, he took off his boot and tenderly felt his foot. Contrary to the impression given him by his lying and over-sensitive nerves, the bony structure was unbroken and even the skin intact.

"Hurt your foot, Mr. Gearie?" asked the Local Leader solicitously.

Joe told him all. The Local Leader's face darkened. He was a young man with a face admirably suited to darkening. No one ever looked less like an emissary of Peace. On the contrary, he resembled

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the most predatory type of Army Physical Training Instructor. His face was hard, his mouth was a grim line, and his hair was thin. He had a cockney accent and a gift for military organization. His name was Rodney Wire, and he belonged to that class who regard a crack in the jaw as the wittiest crack of all, who talk with genuine relish of parties where heads get broken, ears torn off, and teeth knocked out. He leaned forward like a hungry tiger in a cage.

"What was this chap like, Mr. Gearie?" he asked.

When Joe said that he never forgot a face, he did not lie. But the description he then gave Mr. Wire of the treader of feet owed more to emotion than to memory.

"He is," said Joe, "without exception the fattest grossest elephant I have ever seen. He has a chest like an orang-outang, and fists like a Sunday joint. The whole face gives an impression of low cunning combined with brainless brutality. The nose——"

Mr. Wire nodded. It was evidently an excellent description; or possibly the aggressor had at some time trodden on Mr. Wire's feet, so that Joe's words awoke painful echoes.

"I know the feller well," he said. "Name of Richmond Bliss."

"Nonsense," interrupted Joe.

"That's his name, sir," said Mr. Wire seriously.

"Well, it oughtn't to be," said Joe.

Mr. Wire grinned politely. "That's right," he said. "Anyway, he's their second-in-command, and the star speaker. He talks every Saturday artemnoon on the Barelands, where we hold our meetings."

"So I shall see him again," said Joe.

"You certainly will—I take it the Leader will address our chaps and the general public there where we always meet?"

"Yes. Now let's get down to arrangements about programme and publicity. And I take it that if this fellow and his pals try to be funny when the Leader comes down——"

Mr. Wire passed a hand over his thin hair, and a flicker of green light seemed to pass over his eyes.

"Leave me to take care of that," he said. He drew paper and ink towards him, took up a pen, bit the end of it and poised it ready. "Now then——"

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II

The Mayor of Westhampton, Alderman Silas Beere, was a man who took a special pride in three things. The first was that he had been able to retire from the ironmongery business early enough to give himself up to the pleasures of public service while he was still young enough to interfere with Council Officials to some purpose. This he called taking an active part in the affairs of the town. The Town Clerk called it something quite different, though not when he was talking to the Mayor. The second occasion of pride to Alderman Beere was that he brought a Sense of Yumour to Bear. He did not say what he brought it to bear on, but contented himself by telling colleagues on the Council, at a moment when they were sweating with rage and partisan frenzy that he always believed in bringing a Sense of Yumour to Bear. This helped a great deal, which was probably why he continued saying it, especially as it made the frantic ones speechless with undiscoverable mirth, and sent them into a stupor of good fellowship. But chiefly, he prided himself on Understanding Young People. This was one of his main planks, one of the never-failing allusions in any public speech. "I am not, I hope, a vain old fellow if I say that I believe in and Understand our Young People." In appearance, the Mayor resembled an amiable and patronizing bird. He was quite bald, and his head with its beak-like nose was held on a thin neck which protruded from a collar formerly of the correct size. His voice was deep and hollow, reverberating like a friendly trombone in a cave. So great was his sense of grip on affairs that his manner was easy, like that of a very strong man in a cripples' home. What others worried about made him smile, a smile that minimized their anxieties and reassured them that while Silas Beere was Mayor, the town might rest content. After that? Well, Silas sometimes felt there were not going to be any afters.

A few mornings before John's visit, the Mayor was having his usual morning conference with the Town Clerk. The Town Clerk—Mr. Virgil Riddlehoe—sat at his large desk, on which stood three telephones, a box which had the dangerous power of putting Mr. Riddlehoe into verbal touch with all his departments, a large glass

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ash-tray, a wicker basket and a silver calendar. The Town Clerk with his white hair and strong rather formal face looked like a cross between a distinguished Nonconformist divine and a man going to a fancy dress ball as a Government Circular. There was no sign in his expression that he wished the Mayor was eligible to be dealt with by the Salvage Department.

Alderman Beere was sitting on a green metal filing cabinet, his thin legs crossed, his arms folded. This in itself secretly annoyed the Town Clerk. There were chairs—splendid chairs—in the room for his guests. But the Mayor seemed to assert his authority and superiority by not sitting in one of them. There stuck out in the Town Clerk's mind throughout all their discussions, like the end of a girder, a rebuke beginning, "Why you must sit on that cabinet, I can't imagine. That's for files, not for Mayors, though, upon my word——" But these words could not be spoken. Success in Local Government is not built on such foundations.

"Well, now, Riddlehoe," said the Mayor, "is there anything else this morning?"

So might God, thought the Town Clerk, have spoken to the Chief Administrative Officer of Heaven on the morning of the Seventh Day.

"No, I don't think so, Mr. Mayor," replied Mr. Riddlehoe, with a deliberation he did not feel.

Reluctantly the Mayor raised himself from his eyrie on the filing cabinet. The girder in the Town Clerk's mind eased slightly. The Mayor looked at his watch.

"Then I'll go over to lunch," said he. "Are you lunching at the Sceptre to-day?"

The Mayor did not want the company of Mr. Riddlehoe qua Mr. Riddlehoe. He wanted to maintain his lines of communication with the affairs of the town. Without qualification Mr. Riddlehoe did not desire the society of the Mayor qua anything.

"No, not to-day, Mr. Mayor," he replied, in the parched tones of a man who hoped to be believed. "I've got several people coming in, so I shall have sandwiches in here."

The Mayor nodded and noted his secret flatness. No more subtle

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flattery, no more essence of interference till the Committee of Ways and Means sat at four that afternoon.

"I'll see you at four then," he said.

The Town Clerk was not to be caught like that. If he had so few appointments that he could remember them offhand, there might have been a motion to reduce his salary. He laid a hand on his diary and frowned at it.

"Yes—oh, yes. That's right," he agreed.

The Mayor again nodded and went through a green baize door that led into the Mayor's Parlour. The Town Clerk depressed a lever in the box on his desk, whereupon a monstrous bee filled the room with a long angry official buzz. It stopped abruptly and a voice, apparently belonging to a man with a total catarrh made a remark in some language understood by the Town Clerk.

"Is that Crammer?" said the Town Clerk.

"Wah—der—wah—wah—wumpp," replied the afflicted one.

"Gone to lunch, has he?" said the Town Clerk, translating freely and glancing at the clock. "It's only five to one."

The voice began a long and painful recitative. It was too much for even the Town Clerk's erudition. He cut it short.

"Never mind," he said. "Ring the Sceptre and tell them to send me lunch over. Chicken if there is any, underdone beef if not. And if it's kidney soup, I don't want any."

"Wah—der—wah—der?" asked the voice.

"No. Nor yet mulligatawny. Anything else, yes."

The Town Clerk snapped the lever up, and thinking of something else, rose and went to the green baize door, which he tapped swiftly and pushed open.

"There was one other thing, Mr. Mayor," he said.

The Mayor was stooping over a cupboard and now turned sharply and even a shade angrily towards the Town Clerk. In one hand he held a bottle of Municipal Amontillado, in the other a glass which he had just filled with the golden liquid.

The Town Clerk's eyes fastened on the bottle.

"Dear, dear, Riddlehoe," said the Mayor, his brow wrinkling with fright. "You quite startled me. I thought you'd gone out."

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"No," said the Town Clerk. "If you remember, I told you I was staying in."

"Oh, yes. Of course. You're having sandwiches,"

"Something like that." The Town Clerk's eyes were still on the sherry. The Mayor looked down at the bottle and then fixed the Town Clerk with a steely eye.

"Will you have a glass of sherry?" he asked in a minatory tone.

The Town Clerk took his cue sadly but promptly. "No, thank you, Mr. Mayor. You're very kind, but I don't feel like it to-day."

This remark restored the Mayor to high good humour. With a kind of senile alacrity, he locked the bottle away. "A pity to waste it, then, if you don't feel like it," he said, putting his glass under his nose. "It just happens that I do feel like it." He took a delicious sip, smacked his lips and uttered a long Aaah of pleasure, while Mr. Riddlehoe thought about the needless severity of capital punishment.

"Now, what did you come in about?" asked the Mayor, working his nose and his palate in, so to speak, night and day shifts.

"This man, Klooner," replied the Town Clerk.

"Klooner—Klooner—is that the feller about the dustbin clearance?"

"No, no," said the Town Clerk, a little impatiently. "He's the leader of this National Peace Movement. He's coming here on Saturday to hold a big meeting on the Barelands."

"What about it?" asked the Mayor, setting down his glass and playing with his keys.

"I'm advised there may be trouble, and I wondered if we ought to tell Superintendent Wade to have some extra men there."

"Trouble? Trouble?" replied the Mayor. "There won't be any trouble. What trouble could there be?"

The Town Clerk looked out of the window. "You'll have three large parties of young men there, with no love lost between them," he said. "And you know what young men are."

The Mayor smiled and felt suddenly strengthened to take out his keys, open the cupboard door and help himself to another glass of wine.

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"You're right," he said, "I do know what young men are. None better. I flatter myself, Riddlehoe——"

The Town Clerk put himself into that condition of amnesia which was his sole defence against the speech he had so often heard before. When the Mayor uttered the last well-known word, the Town Clerk came to.

"You don't think any precaution in that way is necessary, then?" he said.

The Mayor smiled scoffingly and scoutingly. "Of course not," he said. "It would be humiliating to the dear lads and to us. If a little horseplay developed, my appearance would be sufficient."

"How right you are," said the Town Clerk aside. And aloud, "Very well, Mr. Mayor. We'll leave it, then."

The Mayor finished his second sherry, put on his hat and coat and flapped a hand at the Town Clerk. "Don't you worry about little things like that, Riddlehoe," he said. "Sure you can't come over to the Sceptre?"

"Quite," said the Town Clerk, and withdrew to his own room.

III

In so political an age as the present—and after all, a high-explosive bomb is merely a political argument—it is natural that the few open spaces of our crowded towns should be used as Open-Air Universities, Political Institutes. To this use had come the Barelands at Westhampton, that large arid patch of ground in the centre of the town. In more barbarous and less politically-enlightened times, it had been a playground for hundreds of children. Now it rang with debate, repartee and sometimes with that most modern of persuasions, belts on the head. Like a strange sea, it was inhabited by three great monsters, one black, one green, and one white, which altered shape and size continually, and in the agony of debate, gave birth by multi-parturition to sundry little monsters, which swayed and swore and had a vigorous sub-life of their own.

Every Saturday afternoon, all this political life sprang into activity. Some thousands of persons assembled round three plat-

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forms. From one of these Mr. Richmond Bliss expounded the truth in a voice of thunderous terror, and uttered sentiments the most provocative his sense of humour could devise, or his contempt of the gaping crowd suggest. From another the little Mr. Rodney Wire, looking but not sounding like a Community Singing Leader in his white sweater and flannel trousers, shot out the most belligerent pacifism ever heard by a confused citizenry.

"We are not going to stand by helpless," he used to yell, "while a lot of bloody-minded ruffians and scallywags push us into a ruthless carnage, a blood-bath, a charnel-house of a world. No! We are absolutely determined to stamp out for ever the warmonger, the cannibal, the blood-luster, and enjoy, whether they want us to or not, a peaceful world, prosperous and secure."

On the third platform, a youth in a green shirt laid down the law in a voice not intended by Nature for open-air exercise. He was a member of the local University College. His hair was long, as was his face, and he looked at his audience through large round spectacles. If he emphasized a point by shouting, his throat tickled at once and he was obliged to cough. When the uproar on the Barelands became really tremendous, he would rest his voice (which could not have been heard anyway) by merely mouthing silently, and making up for it by singularly angular gestures with his arms. To help his audience further, he gave them the same speech every Saturday, and had it printed on leaflets, which were for sale at a penny each. Thus did he overcome by intelligence the handicap of a physical weakness which he felt he had done nothing to deserve.

The citizens were not deterred from attending by this or any other certainty of programme. They came for the glorious uncertainties that lay in the proceedings, and the mood of the Barelands on a Saturday afternoon was one of a sardonic good humour shot through by earnestness and an ugly zeal here and there. That nothing might be lacking to the pleasure of the thousands, there were certain philanthropists in regular attendance, men of no party, whose sole aim was to supply the crowds with tea, peanuts, hot potatoes, lemonade, pork-pies, chocolate and ice-cream. It may at first sight appear inconceivable that a day should ever dawn suitable

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for the sale simultaneously and the consumption consecutively of hot potatoes and ice-cream. Experience proved the contrary, and George, the lugubrious hot-potato merchant with the large bowler and the drooping moustache, did no better and no worse than sanguine Toni, the seller of ice-cream with his curly black quiff, operatic moustachios and white coat with its green facings and black buttons and cuffs.

IV

Bright was the day of John's visit to Westhampton; bright with the metallic shine of a razor blade or a bayonet. In temperature it was one of those days when George the potato man could blow on his fingers, and Toni the ice-cream merchant mop his brow with his coloured silk handkerchief, while both could expect good business. It was, in short, like the politics of the Barelands, neither one thing nor another, but an agreeable mixture, leaving people free to make up their minds or remain in doubt all day.

When Mr. Rodney Wire had drawn up the Peace Boys, three hundred strong, in the Station Approach, to greet John on his arrival, he made them a short speech in a murderous undertone, walking to and fro like a panther among their ranks so that none but they should hear. For already crowds were gathering on the pavements to stare at the lads in their white sweaters and flannels.

"Now look here, you men," he said intensely, "there's going to be trouble to-day. That's not a prophecy. It's an instruction. And it means I want trouble. I haven't trained you all these months so that you can push your sweaters out another inch with your chests. No. When I sow a seed, I expect a tree. A ruddy great tree made of hard wood. You know what I call you—the Panthers of Peace. Get your claws ready. It's going to be a rough meeting. But nothing's to happen to the Leader, except over your dead bodies. See?"

"Look behind you," said one of the Panthers in an undertone.

Mr. Wire swung round to see John, Mr. Trumper and Joe Gearie coming out of the station. He turned to the Peace Boys. "Party—*Shun!*" he cried, and marched swiftly and officiously towards John.

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The station clock said that it was three-ten of the afternoon, and allowing for the charitable three minutes' grace it gave to unpunctual passengers, it was now seven minutes since Mr. Richmond Bliss had mounted the platform on the Barelands. Seeing that the Peace Boys were not yet on their usual pitch, and that Mr. Bliss had not begun work at the usual hour of half-past two, the crowds turned to the only other diversion, with the result that the green-shirted young man with the long hair and the large spectacles found himself with an audience of record size. He gazed at the sea of faces and began to cash in on his unusual opportunity. If the people had been deaf mutes, accustomed to lip-reading, they would have known that he was saying, "Carlyle said that the population of the world was two thousand million, mostly fools," and they might have taken umbrage at this rather discourteous generalization. As it was they contented themselves with begging him to speak up, take something for it, and write to them about it. At three, Mr. Richmond Bliss felt that the hungry sheep were looking up and not being fed. He leaped on his platform, beat upon his huge chest with his fists, waved his arms and sent out a prolonged roar that echoed through the air of the Barelands like the cry of a wounded tiger. Thousands of heads were immediately turned away from the bespectacled young man, and as if in obedience to a divine summons to even more divine pleasure, multitudes of people repaired to the platform of Mr. Bliss. Taking no notice of them, he closed his eyes, put back his head and bayed again loud and long, so that a few more people—those capable of slightly more concentration of purpose—detached themselves and hurried to the feet of the roaring prophet. There was only one deaf and dumb man present, and he gathered from the bespectacled youth's lips that his innocent appearance belied his profane tongue. Shocked, the mute too went to read the mouth and mind of Mr. Bliss.

Meanwhile, John had inspected the Panthers of Peace, and was even now approaching the Barelands in a red car at a walking pace, while behind him marched the white-trousered contingent. At their head, chest up and arms swinging, a look of grim and insolent pacifism on his face, marched Mr. Wire, while the people on the

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pavement looked on at this organized pomp of peace. Inside the car, silence reigned. Mr. Trumper was reflecting that he could command nearly fifty thousand heroes, like the three hundred at his back. Joe Gearie thought how wonderful it was that he and he alone could create all this stir; and the Leader sat, erect and sphinx-like, ready to be photographed any minute.

The procession turned in at the entrance to the Barelands. Mr. Richmond Bliss made a psychological error.

"Take no notice," he cried, "of the cissies now entering the ground. This is the place for men."

The first three words were hardly out of his mouth before the thousands of heads turned away from him. Every demagogue ought to go through a course of flirtation with a coquette in order to deal with a crowd the more effectively. Mr. Bliss became annoyed, with his many-headed love.

"Pay attention to me," he roared.

John was stepping out of the car. The Panthers of Peace formed a cordon round the platform upon which Joe Gearie nimbly leaped. He looked round and saw Mr. Bliss glaring at him. He turned red, looked grim and opened his mouth. From that elastic cavern emerged a yell in a high tenor, a note the like of which had never been heard on the Barelands, a sound of a timbre that made the bayings of Mr. Bliss the feeble crying of a Spartan infant on a forgotten mountainside.

"John Klooner! John Klooner!" he yelled. "John Klooner is here to speak to you! Gather round."

In obedience to Joe's previous instructions, the Panthers of Peace followed up like a well-trained chorus.

"Klooner!" they shouted. "Klooner! Klooner!"

They dropped their voices on each ultimate syllable and made a great pause between the shouts. It all sounded to the people exciting and promising, especially as without drawing near, no one could see exactly what was going on. There was one answer, the answer Mr. Bliss did not want his audience to give. In a few seconds there was no one at his platform save his own black-shirted cohort. His eyes blazed, his fists clenched, his chest heaved, and he looked as

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ugly as an orange dropped in ink. He stepped down among his companions and looming above them, stared malevolently at the Peace platform, where John, tall, well-dressed, graceful, important, his hat carelessly held in one hand, was already addressing the great crowd.

In a few minutes, Mr. Bliss had decided on his policy. He led his men to John's crowd, where they distributed themselves in a close line on the periphery. The policy began to work. Seen from John's point of view, a well-behaved and attentive audience suddenly began to show signs on its edges of discomfort, like a man with an earwig up his sleeve. Upon those blank and distant faces suddenly appeared looks of indignation and irritation. Bowler hats fell away. People disappeared for a moment and then reappeared, like pebbles in a choppy sea, just as if someone had given them a smart blow in the back of the knees. A murmur of protest could be heard and the whole phenomenon looked like a ring of trouble steadily approaching the platform, from where it was for a time ignored.

The policy was simple. Mr. Bliss and his followers were simply but firmly pushing their way through the crowd from the back to the front, regardless of anyone's comfort, convenience or safety. As they went, they replied briefly to expostulations, "Sorry, old boy. Can't hear a word. Deaf from birth. Must get to the front. By your leave, lady. Mind your backs."

By the time the troublous wave had reached the centre of the crowd, Joe Gearie saw what and who it was. He nipped down and spoke to Mr. Rodney Wire, who nodded grimly and about-turned the Panthers of Peace. The uproar began to be remarkable. One or two wrangles developed into clouting matches. Prudent citizens and their wives walked away. John stopped talking because there were so many whose attention was divided between listening to him and preventing their noses from being punched. Mr. Rodney Wire stationed himself in front of the Panthers and waited for Mr. Bliss to wade through slaughter to the platform.

For some time the young man in the green shirt and spectacles, with his followers, had been looking on at the interesting proceedings. At last, however, although he had never been within sight of

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the playing-fields of Eton, he could stay out of such vital events no longer. Without instructing his men as to which side, if any, they were to reinforce, he bade them follow him, and in a moment they, too, were swallowed up in the crowd, pushing their way towards the platform, and getting the aftermath of the rage of a now-prepared citizenry, who had come to believe that everyone under thirty should be painfully done away.

The strictly non-partisan, the philanthropists of the Barelands, Toni and George and their colleagues looked on. George's sole concession to the stirring nature of the occasion was to lift his bowler slightly and set it firmly on his head again, whereafter he waited unmoved, his moustache wagging slightly as he sniffed from time to time. He knew that peace follows war, and need succeeds effort. There would be a boom in trade in due course. There was a boom, more swift and radical than George foresaw. Toni was delighted. This was politics as understood in Italy. He had not believed the cold English could rise to such heights and he loved them the more for the revelation. He jogged up and down in his bright cart till it swayed on its wheels, and he cried, "Garibaldi should be 'ere. This is liberta!"

The battle of Westhampton rolled to and fro, and split up into minor actions. John and Mr. Trumper simultaneously took off their coats, and turning to one another cried, "Hold my coat," grinned, dropped their coats and sprang down from the platform. Now Mr. Bliss and his men were divided from the Panthers by a few scattering citizens.

"Charge!" yelled Mr. Wire, and went in, head down and fists ready. He and Joe made a beeline for Mr. Bliss. The three hundred Panthers of Peace went into action less like angels than Ghurkas. All over the ground, enthusiastic individuals pummelled others, regardless of side and costume. A middle-aged clergyman, waving an admonitory umbrella and exhorting to peace and order was swept away in the white waves of Mr. Wire, looking for a moment like black flotsam ere he vanished beneath the tide, a protestant umbrella piercing the turbulent surface as he went.

Like all battles, it had its strange contacts and revelations. One of

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the Panthers of Peace who in the hazards of the fight had caught his foot in the ear or mouth of a prone figure, himself fell beneath the struggling hordes and rolled for safety and recovery to the foot of the Peace platform. To raise himself to his feet again, he clutched a nearby leg, and springing up, found himself gazing into the face of a young blackshirt. Not staying to introduce himself, he clutched his opponent by the collar and just dodged a swinging blow. In the same moment, he recognized his man. "Simon!" he cried. It was no other than the tenor who had sung next to him in St. Barnabas' Church Choir for a year past, and with whom he had struck up the warmest of friendships.

"You rat!" he said. "You never told me."

"I only joined last Wednesday," said Simon fiercely. "Anyway, I hate your crowd."

"To think you can join this lot and yet go on singing Stanford in C."

"You're a subversive international," said Simon. "Better fitted to wear a samovar than a surplice. Get to hell out of this."

So saying Simon aimed another blow, which his friend dodged and returned with such success that Simon's bells all rang and he resigned for the moment the main functions of his being, sinking to the ground with closed eyes and an astonished expression. With a sigh in the neighbourhood of middle C, his fellow-chorister turned to confront the next enemy of peace.

The uproar was now tremendous. A party of the black-shirts had taken on the task of mopping up the green-shirts, whom they had gradually driven away till their backs were against that nutritious wall which consisted of the stalls of Toni and George and their gustatory colleagues. With what alarm did the libertarian Toni see the action drawing near his property. With what an agony of apprehension did he squeeze his hands and raise his eyes to the putative Heaven where the souls of Garibaldi and Cavour obstinately stayed in selfish bliss, not caring to descend to a fellow-countryman's aid. George fanned his face with his bowler and uttered a lugubrious incantation through his moustache, certain simple words occurring time after time as the main motif.

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News of the battle had reached the Mayor's parlour. Carrying the direful telephone in his hand, the Town Clerk entered the Mayor's presence.

"They're murdering one another up there," he said.

The Mayor looked up from his signing of invitations to the Corporation Ball.

"Don't be so melodramatic, Riddlehoe," he said. "Who's murdering whom?"

The Town Clerk held out the telephone.

"Hear for yourself," he said.

The Mayor looked with distaste at the instrument. "I don't want that," he remarked.

"Speak to His Worship," said the Town Clerk to the invisible one, and pushed the telephone into the Mayoral hands. The Mayor took it, looked aggrieved at it, put the right end to his ear gingerly, and looked reproachfully at the Town Clerk.

"You could have told me," he said. "The thing's warm. Horrible." Then his face became benevolent, the smile of an able man appeared, and he nodded his birdlike head, uttering deep notes of the sympathetic trombone.

"Yes. . . . Yes. . . ." he said, and finally, "I'll go there myself." He put down the telephone.

"Car?" asked the Town Clerk.

The Mayor swung into action. "Yes," he said. "I'll settle this in two minutes."

The Town Clerk seized the telephone to call a car, in an effort to forestall the Mayor's impending speech about the Young.

As they drove swiftly towards the Barelands, the Town Clerk sat beside the Mayor, his face set in non-committal lines, his arms folded. The Mayor bent towards him.

"I suppose you'd turn out the police to settle this thing," he said.

"I certainly should," agreed the Town Clerk.

"And that's just where you'd go wrong," said the Mayor. "These young chaps aren't law breakers, you know. They're just high-spirited youngsters."

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The Town Clerk nodded and did not remark that if the law was the only thing they were breaking, he would not have felt so concerned.

At this very moment, the bespectacled young man in the green shirt was being driven inexorably back on George's hot potato stall. He cast a horrified fleeting glance to his rear, and thought for a scorching second of what it would feel like when his behind did actually touch the little snug fire that burned so merrily and cooked the potatoes so deliciously. His pursuer, who looked like an extra in a boxing film, bore down on him with a hateful grin, slowly, inescapably. Suddenly, help came. Another green-shirt, hard pressed, reached the stall in time to seize with a desperate hand the tasty wares of George, and in a moment hot potatoes began to whizz through the air. The boom in trade had begun. A potato hit the pugilist fair and square, giving the bespectacled young man time to station himself by the ammunition dump. George, sensible to the last, turned up his coat collar, pulled down his bowler over his ears, seized the cash-box and ran. The enemy halted in the fierce barrage long enough to permit dozens of the green-shirts to rally at George's stall where they seized potatoes cooked and uncooked and hurled them at the foe. For a moment, the black-shirts were nonplussed. But there was another source of ammunition. Toni still lived in a hope of trade fostered by the knowledge that exercise sells more ice-cream than hot potatoes. In a moment his stall was surrounded by black-shirts, the lids were whipped off his containers and hands—eager urgent hands without the law—were gouging out his delicious ice-cream. In vain did he try to defend his citadel of ice by beating at the invaders with a large wooden spoon. Persisting, with cries of rage and despair, he was quickly deposited on a sack of his own ice and left to think about politics much as an Eskimo must. Now blobs of ice-cream shot through the air. It is one thing to eat an ice, and quite another to stop one with some part of the face. The battle of the equator and the pole was arousing bitter feelings, when the Mayor's car drove on to the Barelands and made naturally for the place where the fight seemed thickest. It stopped on the very edge of the edible barrage.

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The Mayor stepped out, followed by the Town Clerk. They gazed at the conflict. The Mayor chuckled.

"What on earth are they doing?" he said indulgently.

"Throwing ice-cream and potatoes at one another," said the Town Clerk, who had a certain renown for swift analysis of a situation.

"Bless my soul," said the Mayor. "Help me up. I'm going to speak to them from the top of the car."

With a loyal alacrity, the Town Clerk helped the chauffeur to hoist the Mayor on to the roof of the car, where he swayed unsteadily for a moment, and then, smiling broadly, he lifted up his voice over the snarling arena.

"Young fellows," he cried. "Just a moment. This is the Mayor here."

Below stood the Town Clerk, his hat on at a slight angle, his arms folded, and a look of singular satisfaction on his face. The Mayor's words were as effective as a tin whistle blown in the Hallelujah Chorus. He looked down at the Town Clerk.

"I say, Riddlehoe," he cried.

"Yes, Mr. Mayor?" said the Town Clerk, immediately attentive.

"D'you think I'm in the best position?"

"You couldn't have a better," said the Town Clerk promptly.

"I'll try again, then," said the Mayor.

"I should," agreed the Town Clerk.

The Mayor tried again. He cleared his throat. He made a trumpet of his hands. Nothing of his confidence in being able to handle the situation had abated. If only he could make himself heard all would be well.

"I say, young fellows," he cried again, "here's your Mayor. I want to say a word to you."

Two figures were moving slowly up to the car behind him. One was Mr. Rodney Wire, the other Mr. Richmond Bliss. Mr. Wire, like a bull-dog after a Newfoundland, was driving his foe backward, giving and taking tremendous punishment. Joe had long retired to the red car to nurse a jaw as painful as the foot had been. Mr. Bliss had only hit the jaw with his fist, but there was all internal evidence that he had trodden on that too.

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With his back against the car, Mr. Richmond Bliss began to make his last stand for liberty, Mr. Wire his last attack for peace. Above them, the Mayor was speaking the opening line for the fifth time—the line which, if it could only be heard, would lead to the rest of the mollifying speech. Suddenly an icy nebulum sailed through the air—a stray shot—and plopped coldly across the Mayor's mouth. It was a great moment. If ever there had been a time to bring a Sense of Yumour to Bear it was now. Alas, the Mayor failed in that crucial moment. But others did not. There was a deal of vulgar laughter, amid which the Town Clerk's voice was heard crying, "This is too much." But he lied. He was reflecting, with a hellish delight that it was, if anything, too little. As if to rectify the matter for him, a hot potato flew towards the Mayor, barely recovered from the feeling that he was a ship which had just struck an iceberg; and even as it described its fierce and heated parabola, matters between Mr. Bliss and Mr. Wire took an ugly turn. With a swift and unexpected movement, Mr. Bliss whipped out a rubber cosh, and raised it to settle his debate with Mr. Wire at the very instant when the potato hit the Mayor in the chin. As if he had spent his life perfecting the trick, the Mayor shot backwards off the car roof, and dropped like a plummet between Mr. Bliss and Mr. Wire. The former had no time to interpret this portent from a neighbouring heaven, nor to revise his intentions. Down came the cosh on the Mayor's head. One of the three sources of his pride was for ever gone. No one, not even Alderman Silas Beere, can bring a sense of Yumour to Bear on a blob of ice-cream. But the third flared up into a triumphant permanence as he sat down on the ground under the influence of the rubber cosh. It could be said with greater truth than ever before that he understood young people—unmistakably and incontrovertibly.

Before the Town Clerk could get round the car to see what had happened, Mr. Bliss and Mr. Wire were gone. The former streaked for the High Street, where he walked casually among the crowds. The latter hastened to John and Mr. Trumper who were condoling with the stricken Joe.

"Get in," said Mr. Wire shortly and at large.

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"But what about the meeting," began John.

"'Nother day," replied Mr. Wire. "Better hold the next one in Glasgow."

"Why?" demanded Joe painfully.

"Hundreds o' miles away," said Mr. Wire. He spoke to the driver. "Harry, drive them to Winchester. They can get some tea there and pick up a train to London."

"Why all this?" demanded Mr. Trumper. "If Westhampton's afraid of a little dust-up——"

Mr. Wire cocked an eye. "Did it look like that?" he said. "It's not that. There's been an accident to the Mayor's head. Them that aren't here when he starts not liking it will be the best off. Good bye. Right, Harry."

The car started off, and Mr. Wire gave it a vigorous though somewhat unnecessary push. As the Leader and his two lieutenants drove up the main street towards Winchester, they met a strong body of police marching along.

"I wonder," said John, "where they're going?"

"I wonder," said Mr. Trumper, pulling out his pipe. "He's a good man, that Wire. We must keep him in mind."

CHAPTER FIVE

I

THE Lady Esther Procreme was interested not in causes, but in people. At her flat in London or her house near Hersham, you met a crowd as mixed and fantastic spiritually as the inmates of the Zoo are physically. She talked to people as others read books and for the same reasons, so that you might find that the terribly interesting chap who last week was painting the door was this week

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a guest. She said that she liked people who did things, especially unfamiliar things like research into odd and secret diseases, collecting the pennies out of gas meters, or forging an employer's cheques.

Than repairing defective lavatories there are perhaps few less familiar or more peculiar life-works, which is probably why the Lady Procreme stopped the plumber on the stairs at her London home, and with her slow smile greeted him kindly.

"Are you a workman or have you come in to look over my silver?" she said in her soft voice. "Don't be afraid to answer, for I never send for the police. I believe in effort of every kind. Do tell me."

The plumber, a heavy man with a serious outlook and a fair respect for the upper classes, shrugged his bag of tools into a more comfortable position on his shoulder and looked gravely at the lady with the bright red hair and the amber eyes.

"I bin mendin' the outflow in the W.C.," he replied.

"Really?" said Lady Procreme with a deep chuckle. "How grateful we ought all to be. Do you specialize in that?"

"I'm a plumber," said the plumber, which, after all, was the complete answer.

"How fascinating," said Lady Procreme, her eye falling on a little badge in the plumber's coat. "And that little badge—does that show you belong to the International Plumber's Anything?"

The plumber glanced down at the badge and shook his head.

"No. That's becos I'm a member of a Movement."

"Oh, I love that," said Lady Procreme. "Where do you move to? I must know."

"We don't move anywhere," said the plumber.

Lady Procreme nodded understandingly.

"That's why it's called a movement," she said. "That's marvellous."

The next bit of the plumber's thought fell into place.

"We want peace," he said.

Lady Procreme sighed.

"Don't we all," she said, "Such a shame we have to die to get it.

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But I hope you won't have to, with all the work you must have to do. And does the little button help. I mean, if you press it, do you get peace or something?"

The plumber slung his tool-bag off his shoulder, put it on the stair, and it became clear that the next bit of plumbing would have to wait for a bit. He smiled heavily, and Lady Procreme made a mental note not to forget her visit to the dentist at five-thirty that same day.

"I can see yore a leg-puller," he remarked.

"Heavens," said Lady Procreme. "What happens now?"

"Well, would yer like me to tell yer all about this badge and what it stands for?"

"More than anything in the world," said Lady Procreme. "Do go on, and don't let anything stop you. If the telephone rings I'll have to answer it, but go on."

She sat down on the stairs, and patted the carpet beside her.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked. "Standing is so bad for one, don't you think?"

The plumber sat down next to Lady Procreme.

"It is for me," he said. "I got corns like bay'nits."

"I'll give you a note to my chiropodist," said Lady Procreme. "She has a surgery in Welbeck Street. Is that anywhere near you?"

"I live at Poplar," said the plumber.

"Oh. Then perhaps there's one a bit nearer. Now do go on—about the button, I mean. I can't wait," said Lady Procreme. The plumber went on. The telephone rang three times before he was done, and Lady Procreme yawned slightly several times.

"Do forgive me," she said, patting her mouth. "It doesn't mean I'm not interested. I was at a Charity Ball last night. You know what they are."

"Yes," said the plumber. "Well, we all believe that John Klooner . . ."

The telephone went again. Lady Procreme tripped downstairs. When she came back she looked sadly at the plumber.

"I'm terribly sorry," she said. "We shall have to stop our lovely

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talk. The Duke and Duchess of Murke are coming to lunch. I'd ask you to stay, but I expect other people have outflows or inlets that only you can put right. Thank you so much for talking to me about the little button."

The plumber rose, rocking a little on the bayonets, and put his bag of tools on his shoulder.

"That's awright," he said. "It's bin a pleasure. An' it makes a nice change. You will join, won't yer?"

"But naturally," cried Lady Procreme. "Nothing would keep me out . . . good-bye . . . I expect you can find the outflow—I mean the front door—by yourself?"

Through her friend Princeps, the journalist, Lady Procreme invited John to dinner at her flat. Princeps himself was present, and Lord Procreme. The latter was a tall fat man like a farmer, with one constructive theory of statecraft and one obsessing fear. The constructive theory was that the whole of this world's activities were controlled and directed by the spirits of vanished statesmen from the other side of the grave, so that the only method of handling human affairs was to seek contact, by occult means, with the ghosts of the right statesmen and urge them to interfere at the proper moment. As for the statesmen who were still in the flesh, here present and all correct, they were, in Lord Procreme's view, a lot of puppets, being actuated by celestial wires. His obsessing fear was that everyone he did not know really well was a Bolshevik. Princeps was a little man with dark hair and a monocle who, since he did not believe in anything, needed no theories, but only good food and drink, and a number of new stories.

Not knowing of Lord Procreme's theory about world affairs, John was a little startled at the nobleman's remarks when during soup, the international situation was being discussed.

"You know," said Lady Procreme, smiling and speaking softly, "I always think that Hitler's mother is the greatest world force since the Borgias. She probably read him Struwelpeter and sang him to sleep with airs from Wagner."

"Nothing to do with it," cried Lord Procreme, blowing like a horse in a frost. "Absolutely beside the point."

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"Sorry, dear," said Lady Procreme. "Princie, give Mr. Klooner some more to drink before you pass out, darling. He's got to talk to us later."

Princeps obliged while Lord Procreme gulped his soup and prepared to speak again.

"The situation will take a turn to our advantage," he said, "when Palmerston takes a hand again."

John must have shown his amazement, for Lady Procreme patted his hand with a fish-slice.

"Too amusing," she said. "You see, my husband believes in the government of the people for the people by the angels."

Princeps goggled slightly. "If they are," he said.

"Who, sweet?" asked Lady Procreme. "So many nouns to choose from."

"It doesn't matter," said Princeps.

"What do you think, young man?" demanded Lord Procreme. "It's only fair you should think something. The common curse, what?"

This last word came out with a strangled roar that shook the room. Lady Procreme and Princeps were used to it, no doubt.

"Not," went on Lord Procreme, "that it's any good thinking anything. If a man can avoid it, he should. The whole thing's controlled from the other side. Thinking's no good, because you can't thwart the Real Rulers."

There was a silence which annoyed Lord Procreme.

"What?" he roared.

"I do think," said Lady Procreme, "that a Guard's training leaves an ineradicable mark."

Lord Procreme leaned forward. "I trust," he remarked in a tone of the heaviest suspicion, "that I am not to construe your silence as an admission that you are a Bolshevik?"

"Too tiresome," said Lady Procreme. "Jerry, I spent all your bath time—it's all right, Mr. Klooner, through the door—telling you that he's nothing to do with politics. He only wants us to have peace. You buy a little button and it all comes out all right—so simple, but then all great ideas are. Do many people buy buttons,

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Mr. Klooner, or do they say they've got more than they can keep on already? Princie, you're not to laugh in that inebriate way. It's quite serious. How many people have the button?"

John said that there were nearly half a million members.

"I say," said Lady Procreme. "Can't we all start movements and have buttons and things? And what do you do with the money? Oh, I oughtn't to ask that, ought I, because it's the one thing no one ever knows."

Lord Procreme nearly choked himself with a fish bone. Lady Procreme patted his back, and during the spasm smiled at her guests.

"This means that Jerry wants to say something and was afraid he'd lose his turn," she explained. "What is it, dear?"

"Peace," he observed, whooping as he drew in breath, "is one and indivisible."

"Such a marvellous memory," said Lady Procreme. "He read that in Princie's column as long ago as last Saturday week."

It appeared after dinner that Lord Procreme and Princeps both had engagements, and when they had gone, Lady Procreme and John had coffee and drinks snugly in her study in front of the fire.

"And it's really true," she said, "that a year ago you were making people pay for their houses, and now you're the leader of half a million people."

Modestly John agreed that so it was. Lady Procreme looked dreamily into the fire. "Such a loss to business," she said.

"Do tell me," she said, suddenly looking up, "what are they like—the half million followers?"

John explained that he had not seen them all, but that they must be a fair cross-section of the community.

"Isn't that odd—a cross-section—so lumberlike. I'd love to give a party for your people. I've never seen a cross-section of England. How lucky you are. Do let me give them a party. Will you?"

Not, suggested John, for the half million.

"That 'ud be the sort of party one would like to give the Germans, wouldn't it? But I've got a little house at Hersham where we could have five hundred—wouldn't that be a little cross-section?"

And finally it was so arranged. At first the principle of invitation

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was that Lady Procreme came to the office of the Will To Peace Movement, where lists of the members with their addresses and occupations were set before her and she made a choice. But she was so ravished with the descriptions of occupation and so little influenced by geographical and social considerations that John and Mr. Trumper were compelled, in the true interests of peace, to revise the lists of her choice very radically after she had gone, hoping that among five hundred guests she would not be able in the time to discover their diplomatic alterations.

II

Procreme Place, the little house alluded to by John's new friend, was one of the loveliest residences within easy reach of London. It has vanished within the last few years as a result, not of enemy action, but of one of those mysterious fires which destroyed several similar places about the same time. Its fame was sufficient, however, to make acceptance certain by most of those who received the card of invitation to the garden party—the card with the thrilling little coronet.

The appointed day was beautiful. It would have been exceedingly inconvenient if it had been otherwise, and towards three, hundreds of people were passing through the great gates and making their way with an air of expectancy and certitude towards the house. The certitude was easily explainable. Any deviation to the left would have landed them in the lake; to the right into woods that looked impenetrable to the most absent-minded observer. It was clear that refreshments would not be served on the lake or in the woods. Besides, the guests could hear, shortly after entering the gates, the strains of music from a band which was already playing on the wide lawn in front of the house. Shortly the interested vision fell upon the cheering and festive sight of marquees with flags gaily flying from the top of their poles, and all hastened on to the uncertain centre in good heart.

A stout man rolled along between two tall thin ladies in black. He looked approvingly about him, puffing heavily.

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"It all goes to show," he remarked. It seemed that his companions understood verbal shorthand.

"Yes, doesn't it?" agreed one of them.

"There's the other side," said the lady on his left doubtfully.

"Ah," said the fat man knowingly, "you may be sure that's been thought of."

"I'm not so sure," replied the dubious one.

"Well," said the first lady, "we're here, anyway."

As this was a proposition that could only be disputed with the utmost difficulty and indeed philosophic erudition, the fat man was left free to use all his breath for the effort of walking, and his companions all their thought on their surroundings and the prospect of rich pleasures to come. A few minutes later a clergyman with a pale face and a nose so long that it gave him a look of extreme penetration came along with his wife, a small woman in a large hat. When they came within view of the house, the clergyman stopped. Presuming he had some reason for so doing, his wife stopped too, and waited to hear what it was. He gazed at the house.

"The stately homes of England," he said, as if it were an announcement.

"That reminds me," said his wife, "did you lock the door when we came away?"

The clergyman clapped his hand to his pocket, and then to his chin.

"Yes," he said, "but I left the key in the keyhole."

Without a word, his wife began to walk towards the great house, and as that, after all, was part of what they had come to do, her husband fell in beside her again, abstaining from any further appreciative references to their surroundings in case he had forgotten anything else.

In a straight line from where the band was playing, parallel to the house, there was a hillock backed by the woods. This eminence commanded a wide view of the grounds, and on its summit, like a general surveying the opening phases of a battle, stood the Lady Procreme. With her were Lord Procreme, Princeps, John and Mr. Grindrod, who had just driven John down from London in the red

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car. With a starry delight Lady Procreme watched her guests assembling in their hundreds. Mr. Grindrod could not take his eyes off her, for although he was used to sitting in front of grand folks, and felt in their company that he was in his natural element, there was in his mind an exhilaration at being thus close to a great lady. When therefore she made arrangements that left him with her alone, he felt that Browning and he were kindred spirits.

"Now we've all got to work hard," said Lady Procreme. "Jerry, you travel due south and talk to all the people you meet. John, you have a roving commission—you can choose your disciples. Prinnie——"

"I'm the sheep and your guests are the shearers," said Princeps. "And I've got a rendezvous with my ego by the lake."

"You will do as you're told. Due West," said Lady Procreme. "And I shall take Mr. Grindrod with me. Off you all go. Come along, Mr. Grindrod."

Disconsolately, Lord Procreme and Princeps wandered away in the directions indicated, John strode off to mingle with his followers and Mr. Grindrod fell in respectfully beside Lady Procreme. With a duplicity only possible to the complete cynic, and a singleness of purpose only possible to a man who had no beliefs, Princeps walked briskly towards a secluded seat by the side of the lake. On his way, he passed many of the guests, some of whom gave him, with a smile, just the opening which Lady Procreme desired him to take; but with averted gaze and a slight shudder, he quickened his pace towards his refuge. Arrived there, he arranged, as well as he could, the screening foliage to a density thicker than nature, and settled down to a cigar and the contemplation of light on water. He had just remembered that Dorothy Wordsworth described similar phenomena as spear-shaped, when there was a rustle at his back. He started, turned and glared. The intruder smiled coyly. She was a middle-aged lady with a hat of the variety that in Princeps' youth was called 'picture.'

"What a charming retreat," she said, advancing through the screen and reducing its protective density by fifty per cent. Princeps was well known for his appreciation of pretty women. He cast an

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eye on his visitor, and his spirit clouded over. There had never been a time when she would have been capable of arousing the collector's interest in Princeps. She sat down beside him.

"Do you know what I think is the nearest thing to Peace—the symbol of it in the physical world?"

Princeps made a noise which he had learnt from the animal that was the nearest thing he knew in the physical world to disgust. Evidently the lady thought it was a catarrhal negative.

"It's light," she said dreamily. "And in a way, Peace is Light, isn't it? Do you care for Poetry?"

Princeps said boldly that he had never read any. It was false policy. To his horror, the lady laid her hand on his knee and bent towards him.

"Oh," she said. "Then you haven't lived. Don't you know what one of the grandest poets said about just such a sight as we are enjoying here?"

Princeps said that he was damned if he did.

Into the lady's eyes came a faraway look, and into her voice came a tender hooting note.

"'The long light shakes across the lakes,' " she intoned, and gazed across the water. Princeps murmured that he would be gone in two shakes, as indeed he would, had not the lady taken his hand in hers and turned a compelling gaze upon him.

"Do you know," she said, "I'm beginning to think that you're one of those to whom life has been cruel. You've missed all the tender touching things of life—all those little things that mean so much. Don't you feel a child's joy in the rainbow—doesn't your heart beat just a tiny bit faster when you see the baby lambs skipping in the meadows?"

A slight sweat had broken out on Princeps' brow. A low agonized cry escaped his pallid lips. He put a trembling hand to his brow.

"This is poetry," went on the lady. Then, through the raptures of her spirit, she saw the physical agony of her companion. Her look of ecstasy changed to one of concern.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Are you ill?"

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"I think I'm going to be sick," replied Princeps faintly.

"Let me get you a glass of water," said the lady compassionately.

"Please do," said Princeps. "Ask at the house—they'll give you some."

The lady started to her feet. "Stay here and breathe deeply. I'll be back in a trice." With a smile such as she had always pictured on the face of Florence Nightingale, she vanished. Princeps gave her a minute's start and then stealthily crept out of the retreat, looked round and fled to the refreshment marquee, got himself a drink by influence, and sat down at a table on the lawn, repeating to himself, "God bless my soul" time after time, while he pictured first his lady with horror and loathing, and then his hostess with indignation.

Meanwhile, Mr. Grindrod was getting on capitally with the Lady Esther Procreme. They strolled along the more secluded paths together, with a splendid view of the house on their right, and Mr. Grindrod felt his walk settling down into an aristocratic rhythm, his mien partaking of the dignity of the scene and his company. He thought how easily it could have happened that this could have been his estate and this lady—but she recalled him to some measure of reality by a question.

"Tell me, Mr. Grindrod, what is your business?"

"I'm full time on the staff of the Movement, me lady," replied Mr. Grindrod.

"Yes, of course. But before that?"

"I drove me own taxi in London."

"How exciting. You must have liked that."

Mr. Grindrod did not often get an audience. He proceeded to address this one.

"Well, me lady, you're right. Yer see, in a way, a taxi's a little world——"

"I hope yours didn't rotate on its axis," said Lady Procreme. "So shattering, I always think."

Mr. Grindrod laughed politely. "The same way as a ship or a 'plane. Yer fare gets in—yer don't know where from. Yer don't know where to——"

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"I expect you just guess the destination. So clever. I've often wondered about that. What happens if you guess wrong?"

Again Mr. Grindrod laughed, still politely, though not so heartily. "They tell yer that, of course, me lady. I mean, after they get out, yer don't know where they've gone."

"Oh, I see. Does it matter, or do you send them a bill?"

"No, no, me lady. I was lookin' at 'em in a philosophic light."

"Yes, of course." Lady Procreme laid a hand on Mr. Grindrod's arm.

"Don't look now," she murmured. "But I think we're being followed."

Mr. Grindrod promptly looked round, and sure enough, there was a tall old lady with white hair and flowing black draperies who seemed to be tracking them. She was making little horizontal swoops, and then stopping to scan the sky or look at the scenery. To his wife, Mr. Grindrod would have said, "Don't be so daft." To a great lady, this would not do.

"Do you know her?" he asked in a low voice.

"She may be a cook my mother dismissed years ago," said Lady Procreme. "Has she a knife in her hand?"

Mr. Grindrod glanced. "If she has, I can't see it," he replied.

"Those flowing garments. She could carry an axe under them. Let's walk faster."

They quickened their pace, and the black-clad lady lengthened her swoops. They stopped, and she examined a tree, picked a flower, fell into a reverie.

"Heavens," said Lady Procreme. "I read a thriller with just such a title."

"'Death Stalks the Lady?'" asked Mr. Grindrod. "By Stanley Waller?"

"No. 'Vengeance was a Guest' by the same," replied Lady Procreme.

"He's very clever," said Mr. Grindrod. "Leads you up the garden proper."

"Oh, must you say that? What do you think Mr. Waller would have made me do now? This happens in Chapter Three, I feel."

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"Yes. You'd go out in Chapter Four," said Mr. Grindrod, entering into the spirit of the conversation as a critic and a fan.

"My God," said Lady Procreme. "Don't become resigned to it. What's she doing now. I simply daren't look."

Mr. Grindrod looked over his shoulder.

"She's sharpening something on a stone," he said.

Lady Procreme let out a little scream, and looked round.

"She's not," said she indignantly. "She's blowing her nose."

"Sorry, me lady," said Mr. Grindrod. "I thought we were still playing at Stanley Waller."

"Well—safety first," said Lady Procreme. "We'll sit and talk to these people at this table."

Accordingly, Mr. Grindrod led her to a table near by where sat the fat little man and his two tall ladies, they of the difficult conversation. Lady Procreme smiled charmingly at them.

"May we join you?" she asked. "I think there's going to be an attempt to murder me."

"It's always the same," said one of the ladies, who wore a bunch of artificial violets.

"Really?" said Lady Procreme. "Do you all think so?"

"Good afternoon," said the second lady, who, after all these years, still had a hat-pin.

"Lovely weather for it," said the stout man.

"What! A murder?" asked the scandalized Lady Procreme. Mr. Grindrod smiled.

"No, me lady," he explained. "This gentleman means for the garden party. Don't you?"

"Or anything else," replied the fat man.

Seeing that her quarry had a temporary haven, the lady in black spread her draperies and sat down on the grass. Lady Procreme shuddered and turned her attention to her three new friends. The fat little man returned her interested gaze and they smiled their way into one another's confidence.

"Are you, by chance," asked Lady Procreme, "an artificial eye-maker?"

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"Funny you should say that," said the fat man. He glanced at his companions, and they all began to laugh.

"Funny she should say that," he chuckled and the repetition seemed fuel to their mirth.

The violet lady blew her nose and laughed. The lady with the hat-pin laid her hand on her side to facilitate laughter. The fat man shook, and Lady Procreme and Mr. Grindrod joined in the laughter. Suddenly Mr. Grindrod stopped and addressed the fat man.

"What's so funny about it?" he asked.

"Well, you see," explained the fat man, "I'm the organist at the Wesleyan Church at Ropmansbury and these ladies are my sisters. We all belong."

"I see," said Lady Procreme in a tone of deep enlightenment.

"Nothing to do with artificial eyes, then?" said Mr. Grindrod, loyal to his lady.

"No," said the fat man shortly. "Not really."

"Nothing at all?" asked Lady Procreme anxiously.

"Well, not any more than anyone else," said the fat man.

"Except, of course, artificial eye-makers actually," supplemented the lady with the violets.

"Quite," said the fat man, accepting the sisterly correction.

"Naturally," said the hat-pin, rather severely, Mr. Grindrod thought.

Lady Procreme sighed. "Oh, well," she said. "It can't be helped, I suppose. Have you all had tea?"

"It's not our time yet," said the violet lady. "We work to a schedule. We get more of every blessing in that way."

The moment Lady Procreme and Mr. Grindrod moved away, the lady in the flowing black rose with astonishing agility and moved too.

"Excuse me, me lady," said Mr. Grindrod. Lady Procreme clutched his arm. "Don't you dare leave me," she said.

"No. I wasn't going to," replied Mr. Grindrod. "I was only going to ask you—what made you think that man was an artificial eye-maker?"

"I didn't think he was—I only hoped he was," answered Lady

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Procreme. "Somewhere among our guests we have an artificial eye-maker, a glass-stopper grinder, a slasher, a cold-nut maker, an unhairer, and a nipper-off. It's my sole remaining ambition to meet them, and I thought that little man might be one of them, so I started with eyes. So fascinating. To be surrounded with them, to put them in drawers, to be stared at and never seen. Think, Mr. Grindrod, what his conversation would be."

"A bit spectacular, me lady," suggested Mr. Grindrod.

"So right," agreed Lady Procreme.

"I don't think you need go far to meet the slasher," said Mr. Grindrod naughtily.

"No?"

"Just stop and let her catch up."

"Heavens! She's probably the unhairer too. Let's hurry."

III

Princeps began to relax. The sun was warm upon his legs, the drink had soothed his nerves. That most desirable of states for a good citizen of the modern world—semi-consciousness—began to steal over him. Through the golden mists of his drowsy mind, he became aware that someone had joined him at the table. He closed his eyes resolutely, but the Thing inside was unhappily alert, the golden mists dispersed. Princeps, ostensibly napping, was wide awake. As it happened, it was of no consequence whether he was asleep or awake. The young man who had joined him was consumed during all his waking hours with a great eagerness, a natural flow of enthusiasm which required no object but, like the light of day, just was. He was a van salesman for a caterer of nation-wide fame, and was regarded as a Live Wire. Like Mr. Fulke Greville, he was against Fogrum and desired only Ton. His private conviction was that University Men took him for one of themselves, and that Gentry instinctively felt he was their kin. In order to help them to form this agreeable, if deluded opinion, Jack Turbot dressed just a little more noticeably than a fine taste could approve, cultivated a manner a shade more remarkable than the best people find pleasant,

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and spoke a variety of English which had long marked him down for promotion to the charge of a depot.

Sleeping though Princeps appeared to be, Jack at once saw that here was a gentleman—one, moreover, who wore a monocle, which Jack wished, though he had not yet ventured, to do. Uncertain for a moment how to wake up a gentleman with whom one wished to converse, Jack drummed lightly on the table with his fingers, whistled *Toreador*, and looked round him. Many of the guests had chosen this spot, which was a sunny part of the lawn, to sit, or lie, and talk murmurously, which Princeps had found helpful. But the operatic whistling was not soporific. He listened reluctantly till the whistle reached a good high note and then opened a savage eye.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Jack Turbot instantly. Princeps opened the other eye, and anyone but Jack would have observed that the eyes divided Princeps' savagery equally between them.

"May I introduce myself—my name's Jack Turbot—how d'ye do?"

Princeps lifted his monocle, screwed it in one fierce eye, but spoke nothing. Far from being abashed, Jack approved, and resolved in that moment that, whatever his wife's mother might say, he would buy a monocle and wear it, for a beginning, anyway, on Saturday evenings.

"I think, at an affair like this especially," said Jack in his most cultured tones, "we fellow-members should get to know one another."

"What you say may be true, sir," said Princeps. "I cannot tell, for I never studied pond life. But your theory, true or false, does not concern me. I am not a fellow-member of yours."

Jack laughed in a county manner. "Oh, I see," he said. "I naturally concluded from your presence here that you belonged to the Movement. Perhaps, if we have a little conversation, I may be able to convert you to our views and get you to join."

This suggestion found the weak place in Princeps' thorax where a tiger had mauled him in 1913 in Burma.

"Who are you, sir?" he demanded fiercely.

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"I was going to tell you, when you rather sunk me by saying you weren't a member," replied Jack, feeling a close kinship—indeed, the more alarming Princeps' manner became, the more did Jack feel that here indeed was a gentleman, whose pupil he might with advantage be for a short time. "I'm in business, as a matter of fact—there's nothing to be ashamed of nowadays in that."

"I should think that was the least thing," said Princeps, "that you have to be ashamed of."

"Absolutely," agreed Jack eagerly. "A lot of the old snobbery's gone. Members of some of our best families are in commerce—and, let me assure you, commerce is the better for it. Don't you agree?"

"I—couldn't—care—less," said Princeps, separating the words viciously and letting his monocle fall from his eye to his waistcoat where it made a pleasant tinkling sound against a button. Jack was so impressed by this feat that he failed to pay due attention to the menace of the words.

"If you won't mind me saying so," he said, feeling that the maturing friendship warranted a degree more of intimacy, "you've a lot to teach me. But I don't even know——"

"You're right," cried Princeps, rising to his feet and clapping his monocle in his eye again. "I have indeed. And I'm going to begin now."

Even Jack felt that Princeps' manner was a little wanting in cordiality. He looked at the angry cobra poised to strike, and felt socially embarrassed. Was it possible that the gentleman was an angry gentleman? It was indeed, and Jack was astonished to find how angry.

"You have the impertinence to wake me up," said Princeps loudly. "And what for? To tell me your damned name, by Heaven. I've seen men shot for less."

Jack gulped like one who falls suddenly into cold water, but instead of turning blue, his face went a deep red. He suffered from a profound consciousness of error.

"Will you——?" he began.

"I will not!" said Princeps. "I had to listen to you, reluctantly

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enough. Now you shall listen to me, more reluctantly, if I can make you. You are in business, are you, like some of the best people? Unless I'm vastly mistaken, your business takes you from one door to another. But if it were the sale of palaces, what makes you think I'd rather hear about it than sleep?"

The members sitting and lying on the lawn had stopped their conversation to listen to this more interesting one. Those within difficult earshot moved in a little as if uncomfortable where they were.

"And finally," said Princeps, expressing a venom to Jack that he had tried in vain to communicate to Lady Procreme, "you have the effrontery to suggest that you might get me to join your damn silly Movement."

At this there were murmurs from the crowd on the lawn, and Jack had recovered from his shock enough to show fight. He flashed looks of a limited contempt at Princeps.

"I thought you were a gentleman, sir," he said.

"I had no such delusion about you," replied Princeps, looking Jack over.

This cold scrutiny not only stung Jack, but destroyed for ever his illusion that Princeps and he, being of the same kind, were on the road to a firm and helpful friendship. It neatly lifted Jack and put him outside a cold grey wall.

"If I were not a guest," said Jack furiously, "I should be tempted to thrash you."

"If you were not a guest," retorted Princeps, "that is how I should have begun with you, and richly would you have deserved it."

The sympathies of the crowd, now listening without pretence, were heavily with Jack. At Princeps' remark, fiercely delivered, someone shouted derisively, "Speech!" He removed his cold gaze from Jack, and transferred it to the crowd. They reminded him, sitting there like cattle on his hostess's lawn, how much he hated and despised mankind. With a pleasant little surge of hatred, he addressed them, his choler rising as he did so.

"Yes," he cried, "I will give you a speech. It won't be long, but

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it shall be more to the point than any you've heard for some time I'll warrant. You think, by joining your senseless Movement and subscribing five shillings, that you're going to get world-peace. Let me tell you this. The world's troubles might be solved if people did a little hard thinking, alone, not in crowds. Crowds never think. Start on yourself—it's all you've got to start on. You think you're safe because there are thousands of you. So does the sheep who finishes up as your Sunday dinner. Think for yourselves, you silly sheep. You can't have your thinking done for you for five shillings. That's all."

The members sat agape as Princeps delivered this remarkable speech in a voice of increasing strength. On the last word, he turned his back on his audience and marched away, making for a shrubbery near the house. As he got behind it to run up the slope on to the terrace, he was stopped dead by his lady of the lake. She held a tumbler of water in her hand.

"Ah," she said. "At last. I've looked everywhere for you. Here's your water."

Princeps clutched the glass and drank the water.

"Thanks," he said hurriedly. "Just what I wanted."

He thrust the glass into her hand, and ran up on to the terrace, vanishing into the house, and leaving her staring after him.

IV

The sun's rays were making long shadows. The day was nearly over, and the guests had all gone. Lady Procreme was saying good-bye to John and Mr. Grindrod.

"I can't thank you enough," said Lady Procreme, "for my perfect day."

"We should be saying that," said John.

"Oh, no. You can have no idea," said Lady Procreme. "Good-bye, Mr. Grindrod. Thank you for saving me from the Avenging Woman."

"Oh," said Mr. Grindrod with a start, "that reminds me of something, me lady." He took the something out of his pocket. "The

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old dear spoke to me in the tea-tent. She promised to get your autograph for her grandson, and didn't like to speak to you till you were alone, and you never were. So I told her I'd ask you and send it on to her."

Mr. Grindrod flipped open the pages, and indicated one of a pale pink. "Anywhere here, me lady," he said, handing her a fountain-pen.

Lady Procreme entered her flourish of a signature.

"Not a characteristic Waller ending, Mr. Grindrod," she said.

"No, me lady," said Mr. Grindrod gallantly. "But a great deal happier, if I may say so."

As the red car slipped away into the dusk, Mr. Grindrod was reflective.

"Sweet woman that," he said. "No tellin' where a chap would get with a wife like that."

"Have you talked to Lord Procreme?" asked John.

"No. Never said a word to him first or last," said Mr. Grindrod.

"Well, he's the current answer," said John.

V

Lady Procreme went into the drawing-room, where Princeps was sprawling in a deep chair, with a whisky and soda in his hand. She sank into a chair and told him to give her gin. As he handed it to her, he frowned upon her.

"Why the devil did you give this party?" he said. "Do you even know what the Movement's aims and methods are?"

Lady Procreme put her empty glass down, sank her head back against the cushions and looked up at him. "I never could bear to listen about that," she said. "But I love the Movement. Such fun."

CHAPTER SIX

I

IT was August of 1939. The weather was agreeable, and with the hope that springs eternal, doing more credit to man's digestion than his brains, people were taking their holidays. On beaches, sitting in damp deck chairs hung about with the children's clothes, in hotel lounges, in trains taking more people to sit on more warm sand, thousands turned from ominous headlines to the stubbornly optimistic pages of BLUE SKY, where, among pictures of summer loveliness, both topographical and anatomical, Mr. Julian Egge gave continued proof alike of his genius and his cheerfulness.

As it was not yet the season of football, there was a certain kindred interest, for the multitudes who live, in the season, from week to week on the doings of football teams, in watching the progress of the match between John Klooner and the Fuehrer. One would have said, from a casual inspection of the newspaper headlines, as well as from a superficial review of events in recent months, that the Fuehrer was pressing John's goal. Not even Mr. Egge, in the privacy of his office, could quite disregard the occupation of Prague, or the rather discourteous speeches of Hitler, or the diplomatic line-up in Europe. Moreover, the whole of the Central Executive were getting uneasy. Apart from any convictions of their own, based on what they saw in the newspapers, or heard on the radio as they shaved of a morning, the tone of the office mail was giving them concern.

Members were writing to Stinton Street in ever-increasing numbers, and the letters of some of them were nastily reminiscent of those written to a negligent grocer, in which the customer mentions acidly that the bill has been paid, and would it not be as well to deliver the goods before the shop closes and gross darkness covers the land? If one were obliged to sum up the correspondence in one short span, one would have said that the letters asked that most awkward of all questions, "What are you going to do about it?"

For some days, there was silence from Stinton Street. The Leader

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remained firmly locked in his office. Then the Central Executive demanded a full meeting, with the Leader in the chair, for they desired to ask him that same embarrassing question.

The meeting was held. The mind of the Central Executive was clear and single. Here they were, with an enormous and well-organized membership, an efficient central machine to control it, the whole, one of the weightiest factors in the situation. On the other hand, the sky was clouding over, fast, too fast. John was the Leader. His weapons had been forged. It was for this moment that all preparations had been made, all effort concentrated. What, they made so bold as to ask, was he going to do about it?

There are grave disadvantages about being a Leader. When the Followers reach the stage of demanding action, it is useless to offer them argument. A tasty little lecture about the areas of the world where, owing to the tardiness of the Foreign Development Branch, nothing had ever been heard of the Movement, might have gone down well on some (alas) vanished day; but not on that sunny morning of the Central Executive Meeting. They would have turned with unfeigned distaste from mention of Saxony, Peru, or Baluchistan; of Alaska, Mongolia or Nippon. The situation had narrowed down too closely. There is an hour so late that not even to a Leader is recrimination permissible. That hour had come. The eyes of the Central Executive were fixed on John, and the pencil of Miss Plenditt was poised ready to take down his thundering reply to the truculent ones of earth, his answer to the gnawing question, "What are you going to do about it?"

From that September morning, barely a year ago, when the Idea, in all its flashing splendour, had found haven and soil in John's mind, to this questioning hour was full circle of destiny. There was no postponement, no escape, nothing to be done with the reprieve of words.

"What, then," it fell to the Napoleonic Joe's lot to say, "are you going to do about it?"

He folded his arms on the table in the Conference Room, put his chin on them, and looked hard and unwinkingly at the Leader.

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There was no sign about John of the hours of lonely anxiety through which he was passing. The handiwork of the best tailor in Europe still enhanced his air of authority and adorned his physical presence. Undeterred by the march of events, the lovely rose, dewy and sweet as ever, had reached his desk that morning, and now glowed, eternal June, in his buttonhole.

Now he looked, first at Joe, and then slowly round the members of the Central Executive.

"A Conference of Local Leaders must be called for a week to-day," he said. "It will be held in the Albert Hall. I know there are difficulties. They must be overcome."

With these words, he rose and left the Conference Room. Immediately, a buzz of conversation began. It was evident that this arrangement satisfied the Executive's sense of a need for action.

"A week to-day! Gawd help us," said Mr. Trumper, on whom the duty of making arrangements would fall.

"Now yer'll see something," remarked Mr. Grindrod, leaning back in his chair and putting his hands in his pockets. "Now yer'll see something."

Mr. Trumper entered into conference with Miss Plenditt and Mr. Egge began to talk weightily to Mr. Murrinkle, who was heard to say, "If John Klooner isn't a Man of Genius, my boy, we're sunk. No other, no, not even the great Egge will do."

Joe Gearie, feeling that the calling of the Movement's greatest meeting put the fate of Europe, for the time being, in his hands, and that the Executive were not giving due recognition to that fact, glared round, gave the table a dominant bang, rose and stalked out. Old Mr. Drumme looked reproachfully after him.

"What a very noisy young man that is," he said. "Come, Grindrod. Help me downstairs."

As he and Mr. Grindrod made their slow way down to the street, the latter invited the old gentleman's opinion, as yet unexpressed.

"What d'ye think's goin' to happen, sir?" he said.

"I cannot tell yet," replied Mr. Drumme. "But, not for the first time in my long life, I am regretting that the teeth have, actually, no skin."

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II

The activity at Stinton Street was unprecedented. It was colossal. Thousands of telegrams went out to all parts of Britain. Accommodation for the thousands of Local Leaders was sought and found and listed and notified. The Meetings Organizer strode about, the very figure, the type of Napoleon in a harried anxious world. He was the man who booked the hall that held the men who followed the Chief who had the Idea that brought the peace that saved the world that God built. To be Joe was to be nearest the Leader, closest to history, and only a little under God in this chain-like structure. He went about accordingly, brooding, starting when spoken to, replying with nods, pointings and monosyllables. Everyone was busy, everyone taciturn. The hours raced by to the climax. The typewriter carriages flew back and forth, the Roneo machines flapped ceaselessly, throwing out circulars, programmes and agenda. It was as if a team mustered for a last defence of the goal. Away in the branches, Local Leaders announced their call to the great conference.

"Ah," said the members with dramatic satisfaction. "Now!" And even the members who had written disturbing letters to Stinton Street said, with a certain personal complacency, "Now, perhaps."

It was action.

And behind it sat the Leader, his hour not yet come. He had thrown this sop of action to his Cerberus, and could await the Conference with what tranquillity he might muster.

The Press carried advertisements of the great conference, for a certain number of seats were to be held for the general public. There was to be nothing secret about it; times were too touchy for that. References were made in the columns of the daily papers, and all England asked the old question, but with a new emphasis, "What is Klooner going to do about it?" for none, not even Joe Gearie with his passion for sitting in the Leader's chair, and glancing casually at notes and scribbles, knew the answer. Only John, in his solitary heart, could know.

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We shall single out one of the millions who gazed at the notices of the Albert Hall meeting, who read what the Press had to say and what to guess about the mighty query. We shall enter a small public house in the Strand about noon on one of those hot August days, and look at a man sitting at a small round table, with a double portion of whisky before him, and the *Monitor* held open in his hands, like a screen before his face. He lays the paper down to take up his whisky, which we shall henceforth regard as his medicine, for it is no other than Mr. Gassdrop. We observe that Mr. Gassdrop has, since we last met him, been successful in obtaining a post. He is a paid staff officer of an organization that not inappropriately imposed on Mr. Gassdrop the condition of wearing an entirely black costume of shirt and trousers, with such other duties and obligations as we are to have evidence of in the near future.

We who know Mr. Gassdrop will not interpret the smile with which he read of the great meeting at the Albert Hall, as a sign of goodwill towards John. We shall watch him as carefully as our experience of him calls on us to do.

Shouting for another dose of his medicine, he rolled his newspaper, clutched it like a lethal weapon, drank his potion and left the public house like a man with urgent business.

III

The Albert Hall was packed. Outside, great crowds were kept at a distance of a quarter of a mile from the entrance by resolute but calm-looking policemen, each of whom seemed anxious that a certain item of his equipment should not get wet in the event of a shower, for the item was enclosed in a long ominous waterproof black case.

None but those who held tickets was allowed to pass the cordon. Inside the great hall, the organ had echoed into silence, its last chords rolling over the heads of the company of the Panthers of Peace sitting, white and still, in the orchestra seats. All around sat the thousands of the Local Leaders, come in car, coach and tram

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from the four corners of Britain. White clad stewards roved about the hall keeping an eye on the comfort, if not the behaviour of the delegates. In a block of seats at the back of the hall-floor sat those fortunate members of the public who had obtained tickets. A more critical judge than the steward who stood near them might have been led by a close scrutiny to have formed a mean opinion of the general public, if this particular party were to be taken as a fair sample. At the end of the front row sat Mr. Gassdrop, his arms folded and an expression of pious interest on his face as Old Mr. Drumme, taking the Chair of the Conference, told the mighty audience that he would now call on the Leader to address them. It was one of the great moments of history. The world stood still for a second, like a great heart awaiting news of its fate. John rose to his feet before the microphones, and the firmament split with the thunder of applause. Mr. Gassdrop, strange to relate, clapped and shouted with the best. The ovation swelled and roared into the echoing minutes as the Leader stood, erect, rose in buttonhole, perfect suit perfectly worn. In the thunder, still clapping, Mr. Gassdrop rose, and turning to those behind him with a face like that we first saw, cried "Now," in a voice like a tiger long balked of its prey. Instantly, and before the steward could do anything to prevent it, the men behind him followed Mr. Gassdrop at a terrifying double down the aisle and towards the platform. They were nearly there before realization was loose. Then shouts of "Sit down!" "Stop them!" and "Order!" came from all over the hall. Delegates stood up in the farther and upper parts. The Panthers of Peace stood up instantly, and in a moment surrounded John, who, recognizing Mr. Gassdrop in the van, cried fiercely to Mr. Grindrod, "Get the old man out!" Mr. Grindrod seized Old Mr. Drumme's arm and led him firmly away from the coming congestion. Safe in a dressing-room, the old gentleman looked at Mr. Grindrod.

"Who are those persons?" he asked. "Not our people, surely?"

"No, sir," replied Mr. Grindrod. "They're the General Public."

"The General Public!" echoed the old man. "I give it up. Take me home, Grindrod."

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Meanwhile, in the hall, a ferocious battle was raging on and about the platform. Joe Gearie rushed to the microphone.

"Keep your seats!" he yelled. "Leave this to the Panthers!"

Far away in the balcony there was a little altercation going on between a Panther and an urgent Mr. Bullfinch.

"I gotter get out," said Mr. Bullfinch.

"You heard the order—keep your seat," replied the steward.

Mr. Bullfinch made eloquent gestures.

"If I do," he said, "I won't answer for it."

The steward at last let him go, and released, Mr. Bullfinch sped like an arrow down the corridor and in the direction of those lower parts which were his occupational home.

Things were not going so well for the Central Executive. The assailants had gained a footing. Mr. Egge was already among the missing, having remembered an important job at the office. Mr. Murrinkle was securely if uncomfortably pinned under a pile of chairs, with ample opportunity to reflect that this was how a cockroach felt on its back. Mr. Trumper was leading his Panthers with fists and voice. John was wielding a chair with good effect, and Joe was giving a running commentary through the microphones. Suddenly, at the other side of the platform, behind John, appeared the face and then the whole person of Mr. Gassdrop. He was clearly executing an attack, in accordance with his life-long principle, from the rear. But he did not know that the bright eyes of Miss Plenditt had for some time been on his movements. She was standing clear of the fight, stamping with zest and impatience. But when she saw what Mr. Gassdrop meditated, she seized the leg of a chair that lay handy and swiftly followed him. Three or four of Mr. Gassdrop's followers tried to stop her, and then she so ruthlessly attacked that their opposition momentarily wilted.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bullfinch was seeking main switches, so that we have to keep in close touch with the movements of these three persons to understand the climax. Mr. Gassdrop reached John and raised a rubber cosh to strike. Miss Plenditt instantaneously raised her chair-leg. John, sensing an old enemy, turned round.

"Now, you swine!" snarled Mr. Gassdrop. John seized his wrist,

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just as one of Mr. Gassdrop's followers snatched the chair-leg out of the avenging hand of Miss Plenditt. Turning, she gave him a push that sent him flying, pulled out her brooch, and turned again to seek Mr. Gassdrop. Nothing could have been a fairer prospect. John was bending him over to get the cosh out of his hand, Miss Plenditt saw, and plunged the pin in full depth. At the same second all the lights went out. Mr. Bullfinch had arrived. The terrible pang, and the darkness, led Mr. Gassdrop to believe he had been killed. A terrible clout from one of his own men removed doubt or concern. Without a groan he collapsed.

When the lights went on again, which was when Mr. Bullfinch had lit a cigarette, the Panthers were driving their foes out of the exits. Joe, still at the microphone, cried, "Stay where you are!" but the delegates were already streaming out, and not even Joe could stop them.

IV

Again the Central Executive sat in conclave, silent and gloomy. The words of the British Prime Minister had just come to them through the wireless set in the conference room; for it was the morning of September the third nineteen thirty-nine.

For a few moments, they sat in deep silence. Then Joe Gearie spoke.

"And what," he demanded, "are you going to do about that?"

The Leader looked at the Central Executive with a smile. He slowly and carefully took his rose out of his buttonhole, and handed it to Miss Plenditt, who took it with a blush as charming as the rose's own.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," he replied. "I'm going to join the Royal Air Force."

Having so spoken, John Klooner, Leader no more, rose and left the room.

Joe glared after him and then at Mr. Trumper.

"Well, I'm damned," he said. "That leaves it all on you, Trumper. What are you going to do about it?"

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Mr. Trumper rose with a pleasant smile, went over to Miss Plenditt, and taking her hand, raised her to her feet.

"I'm going to marry Miss Plenditt," he replied. "And then my fancy is for the Royal Navy."

Upon which Mr. Trumper led Miss Plenditt out of the room.

"Look here, Murrinkle," began Joe, folding his arms and looking very fiercely at Jupiter. But the Public Liaison was on his feet. "You'll excuse me," he said. "But I'm on the reserve of officers. I have to report to-day at Shoreham." And the stork, soon to be soldier, marched out.

"Like the ten little nigger boys, ain't it?" said Mr. Grindrod.

"Come, Grindrod," said Mr. Drumme, "I want to be home in time for the first air-raid."

When they too were gone, Joe looked without enthusiasm at the sole remaining member of the Central Executive. Mr. Julian Egge.

"Well," he said, "And what are you going to join?"

Mr. Egge produced a Brazilian cigarette, lit it with a match which he struck on the table and inhaled smoke with slow relish.

"They think," he said, "that this is going to be a big war. But white men don't know what fighting is. They do it all by machinery. Now when I was in Central Africa—you may not believe this—I personally led a tribe of blacks——"

Joe was not listening. "But who's going to run the office?" he cried. "And what about all the money?"

"It'll come in for rebuilding London," replied Mr. Egge. "They'll bomb it to blazes. Well, as I was saying——"

Joe was on his way to the door. "Here!" cried Mr. Egge, "where are you going?"

"To join the A.R.P.," answered Joe, and was gone.

Mr. Egge put his feet up on the table, and closed his eyes. The warm sunshine of that lovely September poured through the window and bathed his face in its cordial splendour. No look of gratitude came upon his features, for he was thinking of lands where the sun was so hot that you could fry eggs on the pavement, and where a few seconds exposure turned a man into a raving lunatic.

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EPILOGUE

Extract from a letter to Miss Celia Dammering from P/O John Klooner, R.A.F. Station, Downclere, Berks.

"I don't know whether the war has stopped them building those houses near Blossomward Circle. I'd rather like to see, and as I shall be on leave for a few days as from next Monday, I wonder if you'd have tea with me that day at Hilforth's at 1600 hours (i.e., four o'clock)."

THE END